

**RELIGIOUS CONVERSION OF EDUCATED ATHEISTS TO CHRISTIANITY
IN SIX CONTEMPORARY WESTERN COUNTRIES**

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes a model for religious conversion which incorporates a substantive component as part of a more complete understanding of religious conversion, specifically in an intellectually-driven population of educated Atheists. Review of the social science literature confirmed a predominant functional approach to religious conversion, effectively reducing a complex phenomenon to a partial explanation. In response, the chief focus of this dissertation was a mixed-method research study evaluating a broad range of functional (socio-cultural, psycho-emotional, existential, experiential) and substantive (intellectual and spiritual) variables influencing religious conversion from naturalistic Atheism to Christianity. An original set of data was collected through survey and interview investigation illuminating and informing the debate on religious conversion.

Based upon extensive data collection and analysis, this thesis concluded that without incorporating substantive content, the comprehensive nature of conversion cannot be adequately represented or properly understood. Further, in-depth narrative analysis demonstrated the integrated, transformative nature of religious conversion in areas of sense-making, identity, experience, meaning and purpose, community, language, and spirituality. Therefore, this thesis advances the case for using an inclusive, transformational perspective in future description, conception, modeling and research of religious conversion in naturalistic Atheism to conservative forms of Christianity.

DEDICATION

To my mother Nancy who through deep faith in God
knew all things were possible through Him
and whose encouraging faith in me
spurred me on towards my dreams.
She, along with a great cloud of witnesses,
is watching those who are running with perseverance
the race set out before them.

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'Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story.'
Psalm 107:2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	1
1.0. RECLAIMING SUBSTANTIVE CONTENT WITHIN RELIGIOUS CONVERSION: A CRITICAL REVIEW.....	1
1.1. Introduction – Appreciating the Complexity of Religious Conversion	1
1.1.1. Thesis Purpose	4
1.1.2. Thesis Structure	5
1.2. Chapter Structure	5
1.2.1. Historical Theories of Religion and Religious Conversion	6
1.3. Single-Focused Religious Conversion Theories	7
1.3.1. Conversion as a Psycho-Emotional Phenomenon.....	8
1.3.2. Conversion as a Sociological Phenomenon	13
1.3.3. Social Context, Plausability, and Conversion.....	14
1.3.4. Conversion as a Cognitive Phenomenon	16
1.3.5. Conversion as a Spiritual Phenomenon	23
1.4. Integrative Approach as Beneficial for the Conversion Researcher	26
1.4.1. Research Benefit: Etic Appreciation of a Complex Phenomenon	30
1.4.2. Research Benefit: Acknowledges the Full Emic Perspective	31
1.5. Conclusion	33
2.0. RELIGIOUS CONVERSION THEORIES, MOTIFS AND MODELS:	34
2.1 Introduction.....	34
2.2. Simple Process Religious Conversion Models	34
2.2.1. Lofland and Stark’s Value Added Process Model (1965)	34
2.3. Complex Process Religious Conversion Theories and Models	36
2.3.1. Richardson’s Conversion Career Model (1977)	36
2.3.2. Straus’s Personal and Collective Conversion Process (1979)	37
2.3.3. Lofland and Skonovd’s Conversion Motifs (1981)	37
2.3.4. Kilbourne and Richardson’s Conversion Typology (1989).....	38
2.4. Expanding Religious Conversion Models	39
2.4.1. Rambo’s Sequential Stage Model (1993)	39
2.4.1.1. Rambo’s Sequential Stage Model tested by Peter Kahn (2000; 2004).....	43

2.4.2. Gooren's Conversion Career Model (2007, 2010)	44
2.4.3. Rambo's New Approach to Conversion (2010).....	46
2.4.4. Iyadurai's Step Model of Transformative Religious Experiences (2011).....	48
2.5. Conclusion	50
3.0. THE NARRATIVE APPROACH and RELIGIOUS CONVERSION.....	51
3.1. Introduction	51
3.1.1. Purpose and Structure of Chapter	52
3.2. The Nature of General Narrative	52
3.2.1. Narrative Definition and Structure.....	53
3.2.2. Narrative Function and Worldview	55
3.3. Conversion Narrative	57
3.3.1. Conversion Narrative as Transformative	59
3.3.1.1. Biographical Reconstruction.....	63
3.3.1.2. Sense-Making	66
3.3.1.3. Identity Formation	67
3.3.1.4. Social Belonging.....	68
3.3.1.5. Language, Rhetoric, and Symbol.....	69
3.4. The Narrative Approach in Conversion Research	71
3.4.1. An Integrative Narrative Approach	71
3.4.2. Narrative Approach Models in Conversion Research	75
3.4.2.1. Zock's Biographical-Narrative Model (2006).....	75
3.4.2.2. Gooren's Conversion Career Model (2010)	76
3.4.2.3. Dufault-Hunter's Narrative Lens for Reading Conversion (2012).....	78
3.4.2.4. Proposed Religious Conversion Narrative Analysis Approach (2019)	79
4.0. SETTING RESEARCH CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING ATHEISM, ATHEIST and CHRISTIAN NARRATIVE in WESTERN CULTURE.....	83
4.1 Introduction.....	83
4.2. Atheism	83
4.2.1. Atheism Definition and Typology	83
4.2.2. Atheism Demographics.....	85
4.2.2.1. Atheist Population, Western Culture	86
4.2.2.2. Atheist Education and Intellect.....	87

4.3. Atheism and Nonbelief in Academic Study.....	90
4.3.1. Negative and Positive Beliefs of Naturalistic Atheism.....	91
4.3.2. Atheist Motivations for Belief	94
4.3.3. Atheist Conversion to Christianity.....	103
4.4. Narrative in Context.....	105
4.4.1. Naturalistic Atheist Narrative	105
4.4.2. Christian Narrative	112
4.4.2.1. Biblical / Canonical Narrative	113
4.4.2.2. Ecclesial / Community Narrative.....	118
4.4.2.3. Christian Conversion Narrative	119
PART TWO: THEORY, METHDODOLOGY AND RESEARCH FINDINGS.....	127
5.0. RESEARCH THEORY and METHDOLOGY.....	127
5.1. Introduction.....	127
5.2. Theoretical Approach to Conversion Research	127
5.2.1. Theory, Social Constructionism, and Critical Realism.....	127
5.3. Social Constructionism	129
5.3.1. Social Constructionism and Knowledge.....	129
5.3.2. Social Constructionism and Personal Narrative	131
5.3.3. Social Constructionism and Conversion Narrative.....	133
5.3.4. Social Constructionism and Narrative Analysis	135
5.3.5. Social Constructionism Discussion.....	139
5.4. Critical Realism	140
5.4.1. Critical Realism and Knowledge	141
5.4.2. Critical Realism and Narrative as History	145
5.4.3. Critical Realism, Christian Narrative as History	147
5.4.4. Critical Realism and Conversion Research.....	151
5.4.5. Social Constructionism and Critical Realism Working Together.....	152
5.5. Research Method	154
5.5.1. Non-Randomized Sampling and Researcher Bias	155
5.5.2. Research Study Participant Criteria and Selection	159
5.5.3. Data Collection Protocol.....	161
5.6. Mixed Method Protocol	164

5.6.1. Quantitative Data Analysis (Surveys).....	164
5.6.2. Qualitative Data Analysis (Interviews).....	166
5.6.3. Qualitative Narrative Analysis (Interviews)	168
5.7. Software Data Analysis Programs	170
5.7.1. SoGoSurvey and IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).....	170
5.7.2. NVivo 10 for Mac and Microsoft Excel	170
5.8. Ethical Responsibility, Reliability, and Validity	172
5.8.1. Ethical Responsibility	172
5.8.2. Integrity of Analysis - Reliability	173
5.8.3. Integrity of Analysis – Validity	176
5.9. Limitations of the study	177
6.0. QUANTITATIVE and QUALITATIVE ANALYSES: ATHEIST STAGE.....	180
6.1. Introduction.....	180
6.1.1. Research Subject Demographics.....	181
6.2. Declared Atheism and Atheistic Views	182
6.2.1. Age of Declared Atheism.....	182
6.2.2. Strength of the Atheistic Perspective.....	185
6.3. Motivations for Atheism	186
6.3.1. Functional Reasons for Atheism.....	187
6.3.1.1. Macro-social Influences.....	187
6.3.1.2. Micro-social Influences	188
6.3.1.3. Moral, Experiential, and Emotional Motivations	191
6.3.1.4. Felt Satisfaction with and Functional Contemplation of Atheism.....	194
6.3.2. Substantive Reasons for Atheism	196
6.3.2.1. Atheistic Views on God, Jesus, Christianity, and Christians.....	198
6.3.2.2. Knowability and Conviction of Atheism	203
6.3.2.3. Substantive Contemplation of Atheism	206
6.3.3. Integrated, Reflective Reasons for Atheism	207
6.4. Conclusion: Atheist Stage Informed by Substance and Function Variables	209
7.0. QUANTITATIVE and QUALITATIVE ANALYSES: CATALYST AND CONVERSION STAGES.....	211
7.1. Introduction.....	211

7.2. Function Influences towards Religious Conversion	211
7.2.1. Function Influences, Catalyst Stage.....	211
7.2.1.1. Function Variables: Volitional Will, Catalyst Stage.....	212
7.2.1.2. Function Variables: Existential, Emotional, Experiential, Catalyst Stage.....	214
7.2.1.3. Function Variables: Social, Catalyst Stage.....	217
7.2.2. Function Influences, Conversion Stage	222
7.2.2.1. Function Variables: Existential and Emotional, Conversion Stage.....	223
7.2.2.2. Function Variables: Social, Conversion Stage.....	224
7.3. Substance Influences towards Religious Conversion	225
7.3.1. Substance Intellectual (SI) Influences	226
7.3.1.1. Substance Intellectual, Catalyst Stage	227
7.3.1.2. Nature and Means of SI Questing, Catalyst Stage.....	232
7.3.1.3. Substance Intellectual (SI), Conversion Stage.....	237
7.3.1.4. Substance Intellectual (SI) Summary.....	238
7.3.2. Spiritual Experiential (SE) Influences	242
7.3.2.1. Spiritual Experiential, external (SEe)	243
7.3.2.2. Spiritual Experiential, internal (SEi).....	246
7.3.2.3. Spiritual Experiences (SE) Summary	248
7.3.3. Substance, a Positive Contributor towards Religious Conversion.....	249
7.4. Quantitative Descriptive Data Analysis Summary	250
7.4.1. Summary - Function and Substance Variables, Catalyst Stage	250
7.4.2. Function and Substance Variables, Conversion Stage.....	250
7.4.3. Function and Substance Variables, Across Stages	253
7.5. Discussion: Substance, an Integral Component of Conversion	255
7.6. Religious Conversion Patterns.....	256
7.6.1. Substance Catalyst Religious Conversion Patterns.....	257
7.6.1.1. S1: SI High / SE Low / F Low	257
7.6.1.2. S2: SI High / SE Low / F High	258
7.6.1.3. S3: SI High / SE High / F High.....	258
7.6.1.4. S4: SI Low / SE High / F Low	258
7.6.1.5.. Discussion, Substance Catalyst Conversion Patterns	259
7.6.2. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Patterns.....	260
7.6.2.1. F1: F High / SI Low / SE Low	260
7.6.2.2. F2: F High / SI High / SE Low	260

7.6.2.3. F3: F High / SI High / SE(i) High.....	261
7.6.2.4. F4: F High / SI High / SE(e) High	261
7.6.2.5. F5: F High / SI Low / SE(e)(i) High.....	261
7.6.2.6. Discussion, Function Catalyst Conversion Patterns	261
7.6.3. Religious Conversion Patterns, Substance and Function.....	263
7.7. Comprehensive Religious Conversion Patterns – Quadrant Analysis	263
7.7.1. Substance (S) Function (F) Quadrant	263
7.7.2. Substance Intellectual (SI) / Spiritual Experiential (SE) Quadrant	265
7.7.3. Spiritual Experiential Internal (SEi) and External (SEe) Quadrant.....	266
7.7.4. Quadrant Analysis: Numerical Quadrant Patterns.....	267
7.8. Conclusion: Data Analyses Results Confirmed Substance in Conversion	268
8.0. TRIANGULATION of QUANTITATIVE and QUALITATIVE DATA.....	268
8.1. Introduction.....	268
8.2. Quantitative Data Inferential Analysis.....	268
8.2.1. Presence of Substance and Function at Three Time Points	268
8.2.2. Comparison of Substance and Function at Three Time Points.....	270
8.2.3. Comparison of Substance (SI and SE) at Two Time Points	273
8.3. Quantitative Analysis - Demographic Variables	273
8.4. Triangulation of Quantitative and Qualitative Data.....	275
8.4.1. Substance/Function Quadrants – Quantitative results - Isolated Stages.....	276
8.4.1.1. Quadrants – Quantitative by Qualitative, Atheist Stage	279
8.4.1.2. Quadrants – Quantitative by Qualitative, Catalyst Stage.....	280
8.4.1.3. Quadrants – Quantitative by Qualitative, Conversion Stage	283
8.4.2. Quadrants – Quantitative by Qualitative, Across Stages	284
8.5. Conclusion: Substance Confirmed as Significant for Conversion.....	286
9.0. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS FINDINGS	288
9.1. Narrative Analysis according to the Religious Conversion Analysis Model	288
9.2. Christian Meta-Narrative and Conversion Narrative Analysis	289
9.2.1. Canonical Text.....	293
9.3. Biographical Reconstruction in Religious Conversion – Functional Influences	297
9.3.1. Context and Community	297
9.3.2. Identity	300

9.3.3. Experience	302
9.3.4. Emotional Sense-Making.....	305
9.3.5. Purpose and Meaning.....	307
9.3.6. Personal Will and Desire	312
9.4. Biographical Reconstruction in Religious Conversion – Substance Influences	314
9.4.1. Intellectual Sense-Making	315
9.4.2. Supernatural and Spiritual Experience.....	317
9.5. Integrated Influences from Pre- to Post-Conversion Meta-Narrative.....	322
9.5.1. Integrated Narrative Analysis Memo.....	322
9.5.2. Integrated Narrative through Stages - Narrative Analysis Charts	323
9.6. Narrative Analysis Conclusion	327
PART THREE: DISCUSSION	328
10.0. TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED VIEW OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION	328
10.1. Introduction – Does Substance of Belief Influence Conversion?.....	328
10.2. Major Findings Point Towards a Integrated View of Conversion.....	329
10.2.1. The Atheist Stage, Jointly Informed by Substance and Function	329
10.2.2. The Catalyst Stage, Function as Primary Influence.....	333
10.2.3. The Conversion Stage, Substance as Primary Influence	337
10.2.4. The Post-Conversion Stage, Substance as Primary Influence	340
10.2.5. The Transformational Nature of Conversion.....	343
10.2.6. Religious Conversion as an Integrated Phenomenon.....	344
10.3. Relationship of Research Findings to the Academic Literature.	346
10.3.1. Comparison of Atheist to Christian Conversion Research	346
10.3.2. Function of Belief in Conversion, a Partial Explanation of Conversion.	349
10.3.2.1. Psycho-emotional motivations, a Partial Explanation of Conversion.	349
10.3.2.2. Sociological influences, a Partial Explanation of Conversion.....	354
10.3.3. Substance of Belief, an Integral Part of Conversion.....	359
10.3.3.1. Substance – Conversion as a Cognitive Phenomenon	359
10.3.3.2. Substance – Conversion as a Spiritual Phenomenon	363
10.4. Implications and Future Considerations - Towards an Inclusive View of Religious Conversion.....	366
10.4.1. Towards an Inclusive Definition of Religious Conversion.....	367
10.4.2. Towards an Inclusive Conception in Future Theory and Research	369

10.4.3. Towards an Inclusive Modeling of Religious Conversion	371
10.5. Thesis Conclusion.....	373
11.0. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	376
PART FOUR: APPENDICES	387
12.1. Participant Recruitment Letter	388
12.2. Participant Information Sheet	389
12.3. Consent Form.....	392
12.4. SoGoSurvey Form	393
12.5. Religious Conversion Interview Questionnaire	404
12.6. Interview Category Theme Nodes for NVivo Coding	406
12.7. Religious Conversion Patterns.....	409
12.8. Narrative Theme Nodes for NVivo Coding.....	420
12.9. Narrative Analysis Findings: Language, Themes and Biographical Shifts	421
12.9.1. Canonical Text.....	421
12.9.2. Context and Community	424
12.9.3. Identity	429
12.9.4. Experience.....	434
12.9.5. Emotional Sense-Making.....	441
12.9.6. Purpose and Meaning.....	447
12.9.7. Personal Will and Desire	455
12.9.8. Intellectual Sense-Making	460
12.9.9. Spirituality, Supernatural and Spiritual Experience.....	475
12.10. Integrated Narrative Analysis Memo with Reflexive Comments (Example).....	487
12.11. Narrative Theme Node Coding (Example).....	506
12.12. Narrative Charts from Narrative Analysis Sample Group.....	513
12.13. Introspective Reflexive Writing.....	525

LIST OF FIGURES and TABLES

Figure 01. Rambo's 1993 Sequential Stage Model	41
Figure 02. Gooren's Conversion Careers Model	45
Figure 03. Iyadurai's Step Model of Transformative Religious Experiences	48
Figure 04. McKee's Three Levels of Conflict.....	54
Figure 05. Dufault-Hunter's Lens for Reading Conversion	78
Figure 06. Religious Conversion Narrative Analysis Approach	81
Figure 07. LeDrew's Trajectories to Atheism.....	196
Figure 08. Guenther: Continuum of Social Distance between Atheists and Believers	102
Figure 09. Age at Atheism and Age of Conversion	182
Figure 10. Strength of Atheism	186
Figure 11. Satisfaction with Atheism.....	195
Figure 12. Contemplation of Atheist Implications.....	196
Figure 13. Atheists' View of God.....	199
Figure 14. Atheists' View of Jesus	200
Figure 15. Atheists' View of Christianity.....	201
Figure 16. Atheists' View of Christians.....	202
Figure 17. Atheists' Openness to Belief in God	203
Figure 18. Conviction of Atheism	206
Figure 19. Q16/Q31 Convinced of the Truth of Atheism and Christianity – Comparison..	239
Figure 20. Substance and Function Variables, Catalyst Stage.....	250
Figure 21. Survey Analysis, Substance and Function Percentage, Conversion Stage.....	252
Figure 22. Substance/Function Influences at Atheist, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages: (Quantitative Analysis based upon Surveys)	254
Figure 23. Quantitative Survey Function/Substance Results Across Stages	255
Figure 24. Substance Catalyst Religious Conversion Patterns by Percentage.....	259
Figure 25. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Patterns by Percentage.....	262
Figure 26. Substance (S) / Function (F) Quadrant.....	263
Figure 27. Function/Substance Progression across Stages	264
Figure 28. Substance Intellectual / (SI) Spiritual Experiential (SE) Quadrant	265
Figure 29. Substance Intellectual (SI) / Spiritual Experiential (SE)	266
Figure 30. Spiritual Experiential internal (SEi)/ (SI) Spiritual Experiential external (SEe) Quadrant.....	266
Figure 31. Substance Experiential Internal (SEi) / Spiritual Experiential (SEe).....	267

Figure 32. Scatterplot: Substance/Function at Atheist, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages..	272
Figure 33. Mixed-Method Convergent Design Diagram.....	276
Figure 34. Quantitative Quadrant: Substance (S) Function (F)	277
Figure 35. Quantitative Quadrants Across Stages.	278
Figure 36. Atheist Stage Quadrants, Quantitative and Qualitative.....	280
Figure 37. Catalyst Stage Quadrants, Quantitative and Qualitative.	282
Figure 38. Conversion Stage Quadrants, Quantitative and Qualitative.....	284
Figure 39. Quantitative/Qualitative Quadrant Cross-Tab Results: Across Stages.	285
Figure 40. Model Compliant Narrative Chart, S1 Nicholas	323
Figure 41. Stage Compliant Narrative Chart, S1 Nicholas	324
Figure 42. Model Compliant Narrative Chart, F1 Barbara	325
Figure 43. Stage Compliant Narrative Chart, F1 Barbara	325
Figure 42. Descriptive Survey and Interview Comparison – Substance/Function	339
Figure 43. Quantitative/Qualitative Quadrant Cross-Tab Results: Across Stages	345
Figure 45. Integrated Category Shifts through Stages, S1 Christopher	505
Figure 46. Narrative Category Shifts through Stages, Sample Group	513

Table 01. Lofland and Stark's 1965 Process Model	34
Table 02. Straus: Personal and Collective Conversion Process.....	37
Table 03. Lofland and Stark's 1981 Motifs	38
Table 04. Kilbourne and Richardson 1989 Conversion Typology	39
Table 05. Conventional Story Formulation	55
Table 06. Zock's Biographical-Narrative Model	76
Table 07. Caldwell-Harris Atheist Survey Study, Reasons for Non-Belief	94
Table 08. Bradley Atheist Study, Reasons for Nonbelief.....	98
Table 09. Functional Reasons for Atheism.....	194
Table 10. Substantive Reasons for Atheism	197
Table 11. Reasons for Atheism in Retrospect.....	208
Table 12. Comparison of Primary Reasons for Atheism as Atheist vs. Christian	209
Table 13. Q18 Function Variables, Catalyst Stage	211
Table 14. Q23 Function Variables, Catalyst Stage	214
Table 15. Church Affiliation Prior to, During, and Following Conversion.....	221
Table 16. Q29 Function Influences, Conversion Stage	223
Table 17. Q18 Substance Intellectual (SI) Catalyst Stage	231
Table 18. Q23 Substance Intellectual (SI) Catalyst Stage	232
Table 19. Q29 Substance Intellectual (SI), Conversion Stage.....	238
Table 20. Q30 Substance Intellectual Knowledge of God, Post-Conversion	240
Table 21. Q18 Spiritual Experiential (SE), Catalyst Stage.....	243
Table 22. Q23 Spiritual Experiential (SE), Conversion Stage.....	243
Table 23. Q29 Spiritual Experiential (SE), Catalyst and/or Conversion Stages.....	243
Table 24. Survey Analysis: Function and Substance Variables, Conversion Stage	251
Table 25. Function & Substance Variable Abbreviations	256
Table 26. Atheist Stage Quadrants, Quantitative and Qualitative.	279
Table 27. Catalyst Stage Quadrants, Quantitative and Qualitative Cross-Tabs.	281
Table 28. Conversion Stage Quadrants, Quantitative and Qualitative Cross-Tabs	283
Table 29. Christian Metanarrative applied to Individual Conversion Narrative	291
Table 30. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts – Canonical Text	293
Table 31. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts – Context and Community	298
Table 32. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts - Identity	301
Table 33. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts - Experience.....	303
Table 34. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts – Emotional Sense-Making	307

Table 35. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts – Purpose and Meaning	309
Table 36. Purpose and Meaning Narrative Quotes	309
Table 37. Purpose and Meaning Narrative ‘my purposes’ to ‘God’s purposes’ Quotes	311
Table 38. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts – Personal Will and Desire	312
Table 39. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts – Intellectual Sense-Making	316
Table 40. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts – Spiritual Reality	318
Table 41. Spiritual shift from ‘old’ to ‘new’ narrative	320
Table 42. Prayer, Spiritual Experience, and Conversion Narrative	321
Table 43. Integrated Influences: Written Emic Narrative, S1, Nicholas	323
Table 44. Integrated Influences: Written Emic Narrative, F1, Barbara	326
Table 45. Atheist Stage Narrative Themes	332
Table 46. Catalyst Stage Narrative Themes	335
Table 47. Conversion Stage Narrative Themes	337
Table 48. Post-Conversion Stage Narrative Themes	342
Table 49. Biographical Reconstruction Summary	343
Table 50. Atheist Conversion Research Comparison Summary	347
Table 52. Substance Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern S1:	409
Table 53. Substance Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern S2:	409
Table 54. Substance Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern S3:	410
Table 55. Substance Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern S4:	410
Table 56. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern F1:	411
Table 57. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern F2:	411
Table 58. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern F3:	413
Table 59. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern F4:	415
Table 60. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern F5:	416
Table 61. Qualitative Analysis: Numerical Quadrant Religious Conversion Patterns	418
Table 62. NVivo 12 – Narrative Theme Node Coding	420
Table 63. Canonical Text Narrative Themes	421
Table 64. Canonical Text Shift: ‘Reading the Text’ to ‘Text Reading Me’	421
Table 65. Canonical Text Shift: ‘Outside the Text’ to ‘Inside the Text’	423
Table 66. Context & Community Narrative Themes	424
Table 67. Context & Community Shift: ‘I Atheist’ to ‘I’ or ‘We’ Christian(s)’	425
Table 68. Context & Community Shift: ‘We Atheists’ to ‘We Christians’	427
Table 69. Identity Narrative Themes	429

Table 70. Identity Shift: ‘I/We Atheist(s)’ to ‘More than I/We Christians’	430
Table 71. Identity Shift: ‘Heightened Self’ to ‘Humbled Self’	432
Table 72. Life Experience Narrative Themes	434
Table 73. Experience Shift: ‘Unfavorable Life Experience’ to ‘Favorable Experience’	435
Table 74. Experience with Christians Narrative Themes	436
Table 75. Experience Shift: ‘Unfavorable Experience with Christians’ to ‘Favorable’	438
Table 76. Experience Shift: ‘Favorable Experience with Christians’ to ‘More Favorable’	439
Table 77. Emotional Sense-Making Narrative Themes	441
Table 78. Emotional Sense-Making Shift: ‘Anger/Contempt’ to ‘Emotional Resolution’ .	443
Table 79. Purpose and Meaning Narrative Themes	447
Table 80. Purpose and Meaning Shift: ‘Emptiness’ to ‘Satisfaction’	449
Table 81. Purpose and Meaning Shift: ‘My will’ to ‘God’s will’	453
Table 82. Personal Will and Desire Narrative Themes	455
Table 83. Personal Will and Desire Shift: ‘Closed’ to ‘Open’	456
Table 84. Personal Will and Desire Shift: ‘Open’ to ‘More Open’	458
Table 85. Intellectual Sense-Making Narrative Themes	460
Table 86. Intellectual Sense-Making Shift: ‘Cognitive Dissonance’ to ‘Resolution’	468
Table 87. Intellectual Sense-Making Shift: ‘Uninformed’ to ‘Informed’	469
Table 88. Spiritual Narrative Themes	475
Table 89. Spiritual Reality Shift: ‘Denial of God’ to ‘Belief in God’ through Spiritual Experience	481
Table 90. Spiritual Reality Shift: ‘Denial of God’ to ‘Belief in God’ without Spiritual Experience	485
Table 91. Integrated Influences: Sample Narrative with Reflexivity, Christopher	487
Table 92. Integrated Narrative Category Shift Chart, S1 Christopher	505

PART ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

RECLAIMING SUBSTANTIVE CONTENT WITHIN RELIGIOUS CONVERSION: A CRITICAL REVIEW

1.1. Introduction – Appreciating the Complexity of Religious Conversion

Religions tell unique stories about the nature of reality, the universe, and humanity and exact personal allegiance to whom or what they deem ultimate. Religious conversion, then, demands reconsideration of answers to life's biggest questions as well as a commitment to a new way of living. Religious conversion is 'a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations, influenced by a contextual matrix of relationships and situations and factors that are multiple, interactive, and cumulative' (Rambo, 1993). Authentic religious conversion involves a paradigm shift between sets of beliefs, experiences, and practices, and a change in someone's intellectual, spiritual, social, psychological and emotional realities.¹ Appreciating the complexity and demands of religious conversion, Rambo (1993, p. 35) declares, 'Most people say no to conversion... resistance is the normal or typical reaction of both individuals and societies to conversion attempts'.

In light of this tendency towards resistance, researchers have studied the complexity and diversity of motivations for conversion. Rambo (2014, pp. 7-8), states, 'Some scholars still insist that authentic conversion is motivated by only religious and spiritual concerns, but many scholars now acknowledge that motivations are multiple and change over time as a person experiences the converting process.'² In this view, motivations are not easily isolated but are informed by various influences dynamically interacting with and upon the convert

¹ Authentic conversion is contrasted with mere structural, social and/or superficial religious affiliation.

² RAMBO, L. R., FARHADIAN, C. E. 2014. Introduction. *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. 1st ed. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. Rambo described six prominent themes of conversion studies over recent history, from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first centuries. These themes include (1) discontinuities between a person's or a group's religious past and their new religion; (2) active agency of converts in assessment of and negotiation with new religious options; (3) complexity and diversity of motivations towards conversion; (4) the importance of narratives, discourse, and language in conversion; (5) significance of the human body, actions and behaviors, physical place and space, and rituals in conversion; (6) conversion careers, types, varieties, movements to and from religious attitudes, beliefs and practices; (7) engagement with historical material and its relationship to conversion; and (8) movement from specialized interest towards a convergence of disciplines and interests. This study engages with themes of continuity, agency, motivation, narrative, and disciplinary convergence.

throughout the conversion process in an integrated, complex phenomenon. Broadly exploring conversion sheds light on the larger issue Rambo raises - which factors are influential in religious conversion? Religious conversion is particularly curious in contemporary Western culture where traditional religious identification is on the decline and 'no religious affiliation' is on the rise. A steady minority of Christian conversions to conservative forms of faith remains present within an educated Atheistic population despite growing religious skepticism.³ This seeming anomaly warrants closer examination.

As will be reviewed in this thesis, past scholarship in the human sciences suggests psychological and sociological reasons for religious conversion. Contemporary scholarship broadens reasons for conversion, appreciating its integrated and storied nature within a dynamic, global environment. However, dominant secularized theories may not be sufficient to provide the explanation required for conversion due to common methodological and *a priori* assumptions about the nature of religion and spirituality, knowledge and truth as well as persistent primacy of functional motivations. Whereas more conservative theologians and converts contend for the *sui generis* nature of religion allowing for spiritual and supernatural reality as influential in conversion, contemporary secularized scholarship often reduces such explanations to merely functional cause. While conventional, more evangelical apologists and converts vie for the intellectual viability of classical Christian belief, current naturalist-based or post-modern scholarship lacks substantial appreciation for objective belief content within religious conversion, portraying it as subjective, socially-collective reality. Even though more orthodox Christians agree with human limitations in knowledge, their perspective contests the inability to know objective truths, particularly regarding religious beliefs and values. While some social science theorists acknowledge belief as a sense-making component driving conversion, it is limited to a relativist view of which traditional Christianity opposes. For Christians, as historically understood, conversion is not merely

³ For further discussion on Atheism, see Chapter Four, Section 4.2.

belief in a helpful or relative truth but requires devotion to a transcendent God and objective truth as understood and believed.

Although conservative Christians agree with the functional benefits provided through religion, their view conflicts with secularized academic theories regarding motivations for conversion as primarily functional and locally constructed. Conventional Christians agree with conversion researchers that religion is important as an experiential, cultural, storied narrative that provides meaning, identity, and coherent sense-making. However, a new spirituality reality lifts the functional benefits of conversion to a qualitatively different understanding within Christianity. A sense of belonging coheres with a new religious group but is more than that, extending beyond the earthly to a heavenly belonging with others (across time and space) in the family of God. Identity extends beyond socio-cultural location to finding self as a highly valued, deeply known and loved son or daughter of God. Purpose and meaning shifts from temporal, self-created endeavors to a heightened questing towards things of God-directed eternal significance. Emotional joy, contentment, peace, and existential satisfaction are no longer located in temporal, self-seeking quests but found beyond self in the person of God. Within orthodox Christian conversion, these functional benefits come at the cost of individual autonomy through self-surrender and sacrificial love to God who sacrificed all for them. The old self-determined narrative is exchanged for a new God-directed narrative through which each person becomes ‘reborn’ as a ‘new creation in Christ’. It is a dying to self and worldly desires in exchange for ‘life that is truly life’ within the abundant life of God – a total life transformation story. For these Christians, dying to self is worth the gain of a new life with God. It is a complete biographical reconstruction from the temporal and earthly to an immanent yet eternal, spiritual perspective and living.

It is this ‘thick’ understanding of traditional forms of Christian conversion which must be considered. This is important particularly in the case of educated, thoughtful individuals who take beliefs seriously, who intellectually contend for the objective truth of their worldview prior to and following conversion, or who contend for spiritual reality or

spiritual experience causing them to turn in the direction of God. In light of generalized resistance to conversion, investigating the compelling influences and processes of conversion is warranted, particularly in a resistant population, the educated, naturalistic Atheist.

1.1.1. Thesis Purpose

This thesis seeks to understand the motivations for conversion, taking seriously the role of substantive intellectual and spiritual belief in conjunction with functional benefits. The sample group is limited to an educated Atheist population living in increasingly religiously cynical environments in order to more clearly delineate the role of substance in the conversion process. To be clear, this thesis does not attempt to establish the objective reality of the divine and knowledge of objective truth. Rather, it seeks to appreciate the believers' beliefs, the insider perspective, on what influenced their conversion - including but not limited to belief in the objective, historical, spiritual reality of God as mandating their response. It does not seek to impose restrictions on motivations but allows the converts to speak for themselves without limiting their perspectives and responses in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of their conversions.

Why do educated Atheists convert to Christianity? Is it due to practical value or its narrative framework for functional benefit - social belonging, identity, purpose, and emotional sense-making, substantive content - intellectual sense-making, an impression or encounter of spiritual reality, or a combination? The purpose of this research study was to gain a comprehensive perspective of components motivating educated individuals to shift their worldview from naturalistic Atheism to Christianity in contemporary Western society. This mixed-method study evaluates substantive, functional and narrative elements of religious conversion. Thesis questions explore:

A. Academic literature to determine:

1. Role of functional and substantive content in definition, theory, conception, modeling, and research of religious conversion.
2. The narrative approach for Atheist and Christian stories in Western culture.

B. A mixed-method research study to determine:

1. Presence, timing, and role of Function and Substance at Atheism, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages for religious conversion from Atheism to Christianity, and whether Substance warrants inclusion as part of a complex, integrated phenomenon.
2. Presence, timing, and role of Function and Substance during narrative analysis as well as presence and nature of biographical reconstruction from pre-metanarrative to post-metanarrative in converts' stories.

Based upon research findings, this thesis discusses implications for inclusive definition, conceptualization, modeling and research methodology of religious conversion, potentially impacting researchers' perspectives on the depth and complexity of religious conversion phenomenon as limited within conservative forms of Christianity.

1.1.2. Thesis Structure

This research is structured into four primary sections supplemented by Appendices. Part One, Chapters 1-3 addresses thesis question A, discussing literature review of the ways previous scholarship has considered religion, Atheists, Christians, and religious conversion in the West, revealing a historical dominance of the functional approach. This section also reviews the concept of narrative analysis and proposes a newly constructed model of narrative analysis for religious conversion. Chapter 4 provides context for understanding Atheism, Atheist and Christian narrative in light of the proposed research study. Part Two, Chapters 5-8, turns to thesis questions B1 and B2, reviewing relevant research theory, methodology as well as quantitative and qualitative study findings and applies the religious conversion model to narrative analysis of convert interviews. Part Three, Chapter 9, compares study findings to other research and concludes by discussing implications for the inclusive conception, definition, modeling, and method of religious conversion. Part Four, the Appendices, includes sample copies of research protocol forms as well as samples from narrative coding, analysis, and reflexive commentary.

1.2. Chapter Structure

This chapter addresses thesis question A1 examining academic literature regarding general conception and motivations for religious conversion. Specifically, this chapter reviews historical and contemporary trends regarding theories of religious conversion,

ranging from classic single-focused to integrated theories. These developments along with the current conceptual expansion of religious conversion are discussed and critiqued. Although not exhaustive, this literature review provides representative perspectives and research studies for consideration. It provides a rationale for countering reductionist tendencies towards an expanded, inclusive view of religious conversion based upon three assertions: (a) historical progression towards a functional approach to religious conversion reduced the substantive role of intellectual belief and spiritual content, (b) contemporary research recognizes intellectual sense-making and religious experiences as motivating towards conversion, and, (c) robust substantive content, along with functional motivations, plays a vital role in religious belief and religious conversion. Summarily, this chapter contends that the study of conversion should include intellectual and spiritual substance, particularly among an educated, skeptical population.

1.2.1. Historical Theories of Religion and Religious Conversion

Historically, theories of religion and religious conversion primarily promoted functional motivations. Snow and Machalek (1984) undertook a comprehensive review of the religious conversion literature from 1965-1984. Their analysis identified three historical waves defining causation of conversion. The first wave occurred early in the twentieth century and promoted theological and psychological motivations; the post-Korean War second wave developed the coercive persuasion model of conversion; and, sociological causes dominated the third wave in the 1960s until the time of their study. Causative factors included psycho-physiological responses to induced stress, predisposing personality, cognitive and social traits, as well as situational and social influences.

Later, Stark and Finke (2000, pp. 12, 7, 34) evaluated the study of religion and also reported the functional approach as predominant in the literature. In their view, scholars failed to give substantive content due attention. Instead, prevailing theories promoted ‘the gods are illusions’ generated by social or psychological processes. Enlightenment scholars ‘began with the conviction that religion was not only false but wicked and best gotten rid of

as soon as possible'. Since that time, most academics displayed a 'substantial bias against those who take their religion very seriously'. They highlighted the gradual move away from acknowledging a supernatural reality as 'the most fundamental aspect of any religion', reporting a tendency to promote religion as socially-driven human construction and nothing more,⁴ or as merely a constructed epiphenomenon in response to psycho-social realities.⁵ Stark and Finke also maintained psychologists tend to reduce religious belief to childish fear, anxiety, and illusion, or as pathologic, irrational, and the outworking of an unbalanced mind.⁶ Researchers commonly studied trivial and strange religious groups rather than larger, mainstream movements or sacred groups who omit supernatural elements or religious commitment. In their view, these inclinations were an effort to undermine the credibility of religious belief. Simply stated, the narrative changed from 'God made man' to 'Man made God', thereby elevating functional and diminishing substantive components of religion and religious belief. A brief review of single-focused religious conversion theories, including psycho-emotional, sociological, cognitive, and spiritual follows, providing context to this historical perspective.

1.3. Single-Focused Religious Conversion Theories

Historically, many researchers studied religious conversion based upon their own underlying presumptions and specializations, resulting in the promotion of single-focused causal theories. For Rambo (1999), a theory is valuable in so far as it illuminates different aspects of a phenomenon. Various approaches include some dimensions and exclude others, and scholars of conversion should be aware of theoretical limitations and options for

⁴ FINKE, R. S. A. R. 2000. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, London, England, University of California Press. The authors explained this bias using Christianity as an example: 'If religion can be redefined as recognizing the 'sacred' in human relationships or in the majesty of nature, then those obsessed with ridding students of belief in the supernatural can claim to be religious scholars, and hence to have the right to enlighten students by teaching that most of the Bible is false, that Jesus said few of the things attributed to him and died a failed revolutionary...and that the history of Christianity is but an unending 'history of atrocities'.'

⁵ Ibid. Stark and Finke contended that the 'primitive mind' theory collapsed under contrary evidence through eventual pragmatic fieldwork which revealed religious adherents' cogent abilities to reason, even in remote geographical locations. Regardless, corrective scholarship failed to change the long-established public perception of the irrationality of religious belief and extends broadly from sociologic, psychological, and philosophical thought.

⁶ Ibid. Psychologists assert religious beliefs stem from rigid intellectual processing and the inability to tolerate contradictions or ambiguities in life, leading toward authoritarian-based ideologies and even bigotry.

investigation. A limited perspective inherently risks reducing a complex event or process to a single component. Early conversion scholars highlighted certain aspects of conversion and disregard others based upon philosophical and theological presumptions, expanding partial theories as fully explanatory towards the whole. Generally speaking, they presumed psychological or sociological elements as primary motivators towards conversion, cognitive and spiritual factors as secondary or absent. The following sections review single-focused theories viewed as psycho-emotional, sociological, cognitively, and humanly based.

1.3.1. Conversion as a Psycho-emotional Phenomenon

The psychological paradigm dominated thought beginning in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries, conceptualizing religious conversion through a passive, deterministic, psychological lens. Kahn (2004) affirmed that Western psychology typically understood religious conversion as individually experienced, intra-psychic change. Psychologists (James, 1902) long held that psychological need, whether ‘sick soul’ or ‘healthy-minded’ served as the primary impetus for religious conversion. Theories endorsing psycho-emotional causes for religious conversion include Feuerbach’s projection theory (Feuerbach, 1873),⁷ Sigmund Freud’s Psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 1928),⁸ Carl Jung’s Archetypal theory, (Jung, 1938)⁹

⁷FEUERBACH, L. 1873. *The Essence of Religion*, Amherst, New York, Prometheus Books. Feuerbach characterized God as ‘in reality nothing but Nature’. Religion is ‘the feeling of dependence in man’ which is ‘conscious’ and ‘imagined’. Humanity ‘recognized the universe as his home and himself as a part of it, transferring the universal character of his being into his conception of God’ upon ‘which his life and existence depends’.

MCGRATH, A. 2006. *The Twilight of Atheism*, United States of America, Doubleday at Random House, Inc. German philosopher Feuerbach (1804-1872) asserted that humanity created and ‘projected’ his nature into an image of God as a consolation and distraction from the sorrow of world over which humanity had authority and control.

⁸FREUD, S. 1928. *The Future of an Illusion*, New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation. Freud proposed religious ideas of god(s) were born from man’s helplessness against the dangers of nature and fate, the evils of society. Man created god(s) who were able to subdue nature and provide life and hope after death yet were also subject to fate. These gods were of supreme intelligence, benevolent, a transcendent good who guarantees ultimate justice. However, these gods were also a projected, perfected image of one’s earthly father, both to be trusted and feared. Ultimately, god(s) is/are wish-fulfillment(s), culturally designed and determined to protect.

RAMBO, L. R. 1999. Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change. *Social Compass*, 46, 259-271. Rambo characterizes Freud’s psychoanalytic theory: Conversion is seen as (1) a constraint against humanity’s quest for gratification of urgent and powerful desires; (2) compromise in the conflict between life and death; (3) an inherently pathological response (for some); (4) healthy and life-giving (for others).

⁹JUNG, C. G. 1938. *Psychology and Religion*, Binghamton, New York, Yale University Press. Per Jung, Religion is ‘a peculiar attitude of the unconscious human mind’, ‘replaces immediate experience by a choice of suitable symbols invested in a solidly organized dogma and ritual or creed.’ The representation of ‘God’ is an archetypal symbol produced within the human psyche, not an external reality outside of man.

RAMBO, L. R. 1999. Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change. *Social Compass*, 46, 259-271. Per Rambo, Jung’s attributes conversion to ‘fundamental, universal patterns within the human psyche that give form to

as well as more recent Attribution theory (Proudfoot and Shaver, 1975).¹⁰ In his work on Attachment theory, Granqvist (2003)¹¹ sought to bridge the chasm between classic and contemporary psychological paradigms, include both ‘insecure’ and ‘secure’ attachment characteristics, and Rambo (1999) encouraged study without imposing pre-determined limitations so that conversion differences and religious experiences are appreciated.¹²

Over time, psycho-emotionally-based theories differentiated between prior ‘passive’ and contemporary ‘active’ understanding of conversion. Classical psychology promoted the passive convert with converting agent(s) or strong precipitating events moving a person towards conversion. Contemporary psychology portrays an active convert who is consciously seeking towards cognitive, affective and moral maturity, although without expectation of significant personal change. Eventually, scholars appreciated the dynamic interaction between passive and active roles in conversion. Richardson (1985) reviewed the convert role over 15-20 years of religious conversion research.¹³ He confirmed theoretical movement from the ‘old paradigm’ of the passive convert succumbing to a deterministic

human experience’ and occurs when ‘a person is captivated by a powerful religious symbol or experience that meets profound needs’ within a person’s psyche.

¹⁰SHAVER, W. P. A. P. 1975. Attribution Theory and the Psychology of Religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 14, 317-330. Attribution theory concerns ‘the way persons perceive the causes of their own bodily states and behavior’. Religious doctrines and symbols are attributed power and responsibility, providing an interpretive frame for particular events and experiences beyond a person’s control.

RAMBO, L. R. 1999. Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change. *Social Compass*, 46, 259-271. Attribution theory is based upon the universal need among humans to find meaning in life events and issues, to make sense of life, and find purpose. The convert adopts a new system making cognitive and intellectual attributions about the nature of God, of self, and of others.

¹¹GRANQVIST, P. 2003. Attachment Theory and Religious Conversions: A Review and a Resolution of the Classic and Contemporary Paradigm Chasm. *Review of Religious Research*, 45, 172-187. His findings confirmed that those who did not experience secure attachments when young contributed to decreased religiousness, general religious instability and change; and, if converted, were motivated to seek after God via sudden religious conversion in compensation for lack of security from natural parent as well as to relieve felt stress. Conversely, those persons who experienced secure attachments as children with their primary caregivers more likely experienced a gradual religious conversion through a socialization process, building an image of God which corresponds to that which was shared with their loving, caring parents.

¹² RAMBO, L. R. 1999. Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change. *Social Compass*, 46, 259-271. Attachment theory of conversion, in Rambo’s view, involves connection (or disconnection) of an individual with their primary caregiver. Motivations for conversion are either congruent or compensatory for primary parental care. Affective and emotional issues are prominent.

¹³ RICHARDSON, J. T. 1985. The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm in Conversion/Recruitment Research. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 24, 163-179. Richardson identified several researchers whose work concurred with the converts’ general willingness and active participation in their conversion process. Convert roles were characterized as actively motivated, deciding and planning to seek new ways to live, new life interpretations, willing, consciously acting upon those intentions. Richardson reviewed Lofland Stark Model (1965), Straus Model (1976), Balch and Taylor (1978), Bromely and Shupe (1979), Gerlach and Hines (1970), Downton (1979), Travisano (1970), Richardson (1980), Matza, Lofland and Skonovd (1981), Long and Hadden (1983).

conversion towards a 'new paradigm' perceiving the convert as an active agent making personal choices in search for meaning and social negotiations. Subjects actively seek, experiment, and behave as converts as they pursue self-fulfillment. The active agent 'works out' conversion as they experiment or affirm their personhood, social participation, and commitment in a new religious group. This trend towards converts' active participation in conversion prompted a new view of conversion as 'a social phenomenon in which affective, relational interaction and emotional ties between convert and group play a pivotal role in participation and commitment' (Richardson, 1985, p. 172). Rambo (1993, p. 45) agreed, stating, 'Scholars of conversion have long been divided as to whether the convert is active or passive. The truth is that this is not an either/or but rather a both/and factor, with a multitude of variations along the spectrum'.

Pivotal life experiences, sobering circumstances, or turning points potentially motivate individuals to consider the viability of their worldview and prompt sense-making within other perspectives. Rambo and Bauman (2012) highlighted emotional dissonance and its catalytic role towards conversion, identifying four major psychological approaches in religious conversion.¹⁴ In their view, unresolved internal tension prompts active pursuit towards resolution and relief, initiating the process of religious conversion. Vacillation between two worldviews can be confusing and emotionally painful, and surrendering to a new life brings relief, joy, freedom, and energy. Similarly, embracing new beliefs can bring psychological growth or deterioration.¹⁵ For Heirich (1977), an explanation must make sense of past and present experiences to be believed or seriously considered. Doubts arising from presenting life circumstances either foster an openness or resistance towards exploring other

¹⁴ BAUMAN, L. R. R. A. S. C. 2012. Psychology of Conversion and Spiritual Transformation. *Pastoral Psychology*, 61, 879-894. Rambo and Bauman represent the four approaches as follows: (1) Psychoanalytic - focuses on internal emotions, particularly as shaped by one's yearnings for and/or hostilities toward his mother and father; (2) Behaviorist or Experimental - assesses the impact of one's immediate environment on conversion; (3) Humanistic and Transpersonal - views conversion as positively empowering a person towards self-realization or fulfillment; and, (4) Social/holistic - focuses on the cognitive and social elements of conversion; and, synthesizes the above three approaches in an attempt to bring a more inclusive, dynamic understanding of the conversion phenomenon.

¹⁵ Ibid. In Rambo and Bauman's view, psychological growth or deterioration depends upon a person's view of conversion as either productive and developmental or pathologic and immature.

worldview options. If a quest begins, the new account of reality must make sense of their situation. Heirich (1977, p. 675) clarified, ‘the new reality used by converts should speak directly to the problem they have encountered and should explain it more successfully than its earlier competitor’.

For Richardson (1977), a negative interpretation of life experiences or circumstances prompts openness towards another perspective. Typically, a person becomes disillusioned with their worldview due to a perceived discrepancy between conventional beliefs and their psychological and physical realities, feels ill-prepared to cope, and seeks a new perspective. In their study, Snow and Phillips (1980, p. 438) found the majority of converts (72%) experienced a ‘turning point’ in their life (identified as ‘situational conditions’ or ‘completion or disruption of old obligations or lines of action’) leading to conversion. Pivotal moments combine with opportunity for life change or the interaction with a religious movement. Converts ‘come to align themselves with the [new religious] movement emotionally, cognitively, and morally - seeing themselves as one with the group’.¹⁶ Studying adolescent conversion and deconversion, Ozorak (1989) affirmed the need for a person’s worldview to align with the reality of practical life experience. Cognitive growth and personal experiences prompt questioning and doubt, motivating a search for answers. Those answers providing practical solutions and social conformity are ‘true’.

However, research indicates that crisis events do not necessarily move an individual towards conversion or a religious remedy. Lofland and Stark (1965) maintain a person’s problem-solving perspective determines whether they are willing to impose religious meaning on events and seek after religious answers. Those who hold pre-convert beliefs affirming a purposeful existence of creation and an active supernatural world that intervenes

¹⁶ SNOW, D. A. & PHILLIPS, C. L. 1980. The Lofland-Stark Conversion Model: A Critical Reassessment. *Social Problems*, 27, 430-447. Snow and Phillips identified pre-conversion turning points as job loss, marital separation/divorce, military/draft, school dropout, institutionalization, close encounter with death, attempted/contemplated suicide, or other. Although turning points increased susceptibility to conversion, they were not deemed as necessary due to their ambiguity, tendency towards autobiographical reconstruction, as well as an inclination to temporally identify ‘turning point’ not prior to but following a pivotal or crisis event.

are more prone towards religious conversion. Conversely, those who hold a secular interpretation of life circumstances typically seek relief through psychological or political means. Alternatively, other researchers (Seggar and Kunz, 1972, Austin, 1977, Snow and Phillips, 1980) concluded that individuals encountering a problematic situation or emotional crisis do not necessarily attribute problems to religious sources nor did they seek a religious solution.¹⁷ Further, crisis events can move a person away from a religious quest instead of towards one. Albrecht and Cornwall (1989) studied the role of positive or negative life events as a precipitating factor in the movement toward or away from religious belief. Their results revealed that positive life events contribute to increased religious faith while the experience of negative events challenges faith.¹⁸ In the context of these theories, the inclusion of psycho-emotional influences towards conversion and the role of passive and active agency appears warranted.

Conversely, based upon his research with Christian conversion, Iyadurai (2011) challenges the problem-solving perspective towards religious conversion. In his experience, religious conversion can create more problems than it solves, particularly regarding hostility experienced from family and community as the convert adopts a new religion. Conversion can be viewed as offensive, causing the convert to encounter pressing verbal persuasion, verbal and physical abuse, mockery, being disowned, denied financial support or home, public humiliation, murder threats and even murder. Prayer, bible reading, and support of the religious community are sustaining factors for the convert during periods of hostility. Due to this reality, Iyadurai included “Hostilities” as a potential conversion phase in his step model.

¹⁷ KUNZ, J. S. A. P. 1972. Conversion: Evaluation of a Step-like Process for Problem-Solving. *Review of Religious Research*, 13, 178-184. Seggar and Kunz studied 77 Kentucky Mormons in 1972. Of the 84.4% respondents who reported a problem situation, only 18.2% attributed source of problem as ‘sacred’ in nature; only 16.2% sought a religious solution.

¹⁸ CORNWALL, S. L. A. A. M. 1989. Life Events and Religious Change. Ibid.31, 23-38. Specifically, they examined positive and negative life events (of self and others) and their effect on religious beliefs, attitudes and commitment among Mormons. Life events included physical, behavioral, relational changes, and situational changes. Their findings concluded that positive religious or life events increased belief and commitment; negative religious experiences, church relationships or life events decreased religious belief; non-religious negative events for oneself tended to decrease religious belief; whereas, non-religious negative events in others’ lives tended to increase religious belief for oneself.

Social relationships both inside and outside of converts' lives influence conversion, although conversion may occur even at the cost of social loss.

1.3.2. Conversion as a Sociological Phenomenon

Sociologically-based pragmatic theories and models emerged during the 1960s as researchers began to acknowledge conversion as an integrated process informed by diverse influences, including socially-driven motivations. Whereas psychological sciences tended to focus on individuals' internal subjective states as influencing felt-need towards conversion, sociologists emphasized the external social sway. In their view, individuals are human agents shaped by and seeking towards social acceptance and belonging. Relationships both inside and outside of the new religious group affect an individual's willingness to convert. Lofland and Stark's (1965) groundbreaking study of conversion investigated factors influencing movement towards conversion, including situational contingencies arising from the interaction between potential convert and religious group.¹⁹ Their study affirmed the priority of social relationships as instrumental in the converts' acceptance of religious beliefs. Close engagement and ongoing interaction reinforce established affective bonds as well as a new belief system. The need for continuing social support was later confirmed by others (Austin, 1977; Snow and Phillips, 1980). Snow and Phillips (1980, pp. 442, 444) maintained once an individual has converted, ongoing 'intensive interaction' was 'perhaps the most important factor in the conversion process', and when combined with initial affective bonds served as 'the key' to transformation. Kahn (2000) maintained, 'When a virtual smorgasbord of transformative world views exists, the question arises as to how and why one alternative is selected over another: the answer again seems to lie within the process of affective and intensive interaction'. Rambo (1993) and Bauman (2012) later substantiated the role of interpersonal social encounters and interactions of the potential convert with the new

¹⁹ STARK, J. L. A. R. 1965. Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective. *American Sociological Review*, 30, 862-875. Lofland and Stark's study included interviews of 15 converts to a small, millenarian Korean cult in Northern California, The Divine Precepts, as well as those within the converts' social settings (i.e., family, friends, work colleagues).

religious group as a critical component of conversion. Perceived social and religious needs, expectations, and hopes help motivate potential converts and groups. Social and emotional bonding between the two parties facilitates religious conversion and ongoing commitment, particularly as the convert forms new relationships, participates in new ‘roles, relationships, and rhetoric’ of the new group, and obtains a new sense of place and purpose as guided by a new religious ideology.

1.3.3. Social Context, Plausibility, and Conversion

Researchers also believe social context is a central component of religious conversion, particularly a person’s family, friends, ethnic group, religious community, and neighborhood. For Regnerus and Uecker (2006, pp. 218-220), social contexts serve as ‘the most elemental and necessary precursors of conversion to a new religious movement’. Religious formation and change occur through the influence of parental religiosity, parent/child relationships, family structure, and shared religious conversations, routines and activities.²⁰ Bauman and Rambo (2012 p. 882) declared cultural/social contexts as part of the ‘dynamic force field that provides the matrix in which religious and spiritual transformation takes place’. A wider view of conversion considers the larger cultural and social macro-environments in which religion is understood. Micro-contexts include the role of immediate social environments, relationships, and dispositions in the potential convert’s life, creating a sense of identity and belonging, shaping a person’s thoughts, feelings, and actions. Both macro- and micro-contexts interact to approve or reject beliefs and ideologies and to facilitate or counteract new social relationships, identities, experiences, and religions.²¹

²⁰ UECKER, M. R. A. J. E. 2006. Finding Faith, Losing Faith: The Prevalence and Context of Religious Transformations during Adolescence. *Review of Religious Research*, 47, 217-237. Religious modeling of parents influenced the religious choices of their children: Parents high in religiosity fostered a rapid growth in religious belief and prevents loss of faith; Single parent homes fostered a decline in religious belief as compared to traditional two-parent home; Parents with higher education fostered greater religious stability whereas less educated families allowed for greater incidence of children adopting new religious ideas.

²¹ BAUMAN, L. R. R. A. S. C. 2012. Psychology of Conversion and Spiritual Transformation. *Pastoral Psychology*, 61, 879-894. Macro-contexts included historical and current roles of mass communication, mobility, technology, and industrialization; religious choices, ideologies; cultural view of religion and influence of secularism; stabilization and/or erosion of cultural traditions; economic stability; socio-cultural fragmentation and isolation, etc. Micro-contexts included the role of family, ethnic group, religious community, and neighborhood, those individual and group relationships giving an identity and sense of belonging.

However, just as social contexts positively influence religion and religious conversion, they can also have negative impact. Sociologist Berger (1974) maintained that the progressive loss of religious plausibility in social contexts shrinks the role of religion in social life and individual consciousness. As religion is increasingly conceived as merely social or psychological, this process delegitimizes supernatural religious phenomenon and legitimizes a secularized worldview. A dominating 'functional approach' to religion 'slices reality' in such a way as to effectively deny substantive religious content. It diminishes differences among varieties of belief to the point of inattention, reducing substantive thought and transcendent experience to any other ordinary phenomenon (Berger, 1974, p. 132):

The functional approach to religions, whatever the original theoretical intentions of its authors, serves to provide quasi-scientific legitimations of a secularized worldview. It achieves this purpose by an essentially simple cognitive procedure: The specificity of the religious phenomenon is avoided by equating it with other phenomena. The religious phenomenon is 'flattened out.' Finally, it is no longer perceived.

Religion is absorbed into a night in which all cats are grey. The greyness is the secularized view of reality in which any manifestations of transcendence are, strictly speaking, meaningless, and therefore can only be dealt with in terms of social or psychological functions that can be understood without reference to transcendence.

Berger (1967) maintained all religious traditions require a legitimizing social community to support their continuing plausibility. The firmer the plausibility structure is, the firmer the world based upon it. The less firm the plausibility structure becomes the more acute the need for world-maintaining legitimations. However, if legitimizing social structures do not support religion as worth belief, then religion will fade.²² For Newbigin (1986, p. 10) plausibility structure is 'a social structure of ideas and practices that create the conditions determining what beliefs are plausible within the society in question,' and the 'acceptance of which is normally taken for granted without argument, and dissent from which

²² BERGER, P. L. 1967. *The Sacred Canopy*, New York, New York, Doubleday. Regarding specific religious communities, Berger gives an example: 'The reality of the Christian world depends upon the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized in such a way that this world will be real to them. When this plausibility structure loses its intactness or continuity, the Christian world begins to totter and its reality ceases to impose itself as a self-evident truth.'

is regarded as heresy'. While Newbigin (1986, p. 64) understands society's role in creating the plausibility of religious conversion, he also appreciates the convert coming to believe a new plausibility structure of reality:

[Religious conversion to Christianity is] not only a conversion of the will and of the feelings but a conversion of the mind – a 'paradigm shift' that leads to a new vision of how things are and, not at once but gradually, to the development of a new plausibility structure in which the most real of all realities is the living God whose character is 'rendered' for us in the pages of Scripture.

Religious conversion leads to the acceptance of a new substantively grounded plausibility structure and a new way of seeing, experiencing, and living in reality. This paradigm shift was succinctly characterized by Atheist convert, C.S. Lewis (1962, pp. 164-165), when he said, 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.'

1.3.4. Conversion as a Cognitive Phenomenon

Rise of religious cults in the 1960s captivated the interest of researchers to study the growing phenomenon of religious conversion. Although social or psychological influences were the primary focus, investigators recognized particularities of belief as descriptive of distinctive religious paradigms. They affirmed the ultimate claims of religious belief as an inescapable aspect of conversion. Lofland and Stark (1965, p. 862) described conversion as 'when a person gives up one perspective or ordered view of the world for another'. Similarly, Seggar and Kunz (1972, p. 178) defined religious conversion as 'a process by which a person comes to accept the ideology of a group.' Greil (1977, p. 188) characterized conversion as incorporating a changed worldview perspective, 'coming to accept the opinions of one's significant others.' Similarly, Heirich (1977, pp. 654, 655, 675) defined conversion as 'accepting a belief system and behaviors strongly at odds with one's previous cognitive structure and actions' or returning to the same worldview 'to a set of beliefs and commitments against which one has been strongly in rebellion.' He further described

conversion as ‘fairly radical reorientation of religious understandings and a continuing religious quest’ for the convert, including a ‘major examination of the claims of root reality’.

These definitions of conversion implied varying levels of substantive belief for the convert – from mere acceptance or professed belief of others’ opinions to a radical shift in religious orientation and root reality (Stark, 1965, Greil, 1977).²³ Gartrell and Shannon (1985) affirmed cognitive evaluation of the new belief system must occur if the convert is to move from mere participation to belief of the new ideology prior to or during the conversion process.²⁴ Snow and Machalek (1984, pp. 169-171) also distinguished between radical change in conversion (regeneration) and more superficial change (adhesion or alternation) which does not disrupt an existing world view. Their view affirmed the substantive component as foundational, seeing conversion as radical change in beliefs, values, behaviors, identity, and interpersonal loyalties. For them, religious conversion is a fundamental alteration in one’s ‘sense of ultimate grounding’ or ‘root reality’ with ‘displacement of one universe of discourse by another.’ Nominal, peripheral or previously unheld beliefs become true and central, informing life. For Straus (1979, pp. 163-164), ‘the most intriguing aspect of the conversion phenomenon is how material communicated to the seeker as concepts comes to be experiences as actuality’ and how ‘the grounds of meaning and collective reality of a social world which the person initially accepts become a belief for which the person may willingly suffer and die a martyr’. He maintained that an active seeker pursues, accepts, and commits to a new world by participating in new experiences, mastering new practices, forming a new identity thereby establishing a new reality. Converts are active in the construction and reconstruction of their social and phenomenological realities as they work to

²³ STARK, J. L. A. R. 1965. Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective. *American Sociological Review*, 30, 862-875. Lofland and Stark differentiated two degrees of conversion: (1) verbal converts – professed belief but not active in new convert role; and, (2) total converts – change in belief as exhibited in word and action. GREIL, A. L. 1977. Previous Dispositions and Conversion to Perspectives of Social and Religious Movements. *Sociological Analysis*, 38, 115-125. Greil differentiates between ‘conversion’ (incorporating changed worldview) from ‘recruitment’ (changed action and involvement but not necessarily altered perspective).

²⁴ SHANNON, C. D. G. A. Z. K. 1985. Contacts, Cognitions, and Conversions: A Rational Choice Approach. *Review of Religious Research*, 27, 32-48. Their Rational Choice Approach to religious conversion in which the ‘pieces of the conversion puzzle’ include social-emotional and/or cognitive rewards. They assert that a convert is motivated based upon probable outcome of their action towards or against conversion, p. 39.

make conversion behaviorally and experientially real to self and others. When the convert encounters unqualified belief, conversion becomes tenuous and the convert often defects from the new belief system. However, Straus's use of the term 'unqualified belief' begs the question of whether conversion reaches beyond mere active participation and construction of a new social reality to the need for intellectual grounding.

The literature also suggests that cognitive sense-making plays a role in religious conversion through an individual's desire to understand reality in a novel way. When a person's presumed worldview becomes challenged, felt cognitive dissonance can prompt seeking after another perspective to provide an answer (Lofland and Stark, 1965, Greil, 1977, Gartrell and Shannon, 1985, Pitt, 1991, Rambo, 1993, 1999). Lofland and Stark (1965) proposed that a perceived discrepancy between an individual's beliefs and the reality of life's experiences creates an open disposition towards active searching for a new view of the world that makes sense.²⁵ For Greil (1977, p. 119), 'man is a meaning-seeking animal who cannot endure the sense of being bereft of a viable worldview' and if disillusioned searches for a perspective that can restore meaning to the world within social referents.²⁶ Gartrell and Shannon (1985) similarly viewed conversion as a means of ridding oneself of the unpleasant state of cognitive imbalance and obtaining social rewards from others as a conscious deliberation of alternative choices. Rambo (1999) called this view an 'intellectualist theory' of conversion which promotes humans as active agents who seek to understand, explain, predict, and control their world through cognitive activities. Pitt (1991, p. 174) perceived conversion as facilitated through the cognitive states of individuals as converts seek

²⁵ STARK, J. L. A. R. 1965. Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective. *American Sociological Review*, 30, 862-875. Lofland and Stark's examples of tension-producing circumstances as: unrealized wealth, knowledge, fame, prestige; hallucinatory activity, frustrated sexual and marital relations, homosexual guilt, acute fear of face-to-face interaction, disabling and disfiguring physical conditions, a frustrated desire for a significant, heroic, religious status...to be a famous agent for divine purposes.

²⁶ GREIL, A. L. 1977. Previous Dispositions and Conversion to Perspectives of Social and Religious Movements. *Sociological Analysis*, 38, 115-125. For Greil, an individual's knowledge is utilitarian and will generally remain unevaluated and unaltered as long as it sufficiently navigates presenting situations and adequately interprets past experiences. If a person encounters a new situation for which their stock of knowledge is inept to resolve the issue at hand, he/she will be pressed to 'learn something new' or 'work out the answer' or realize that 'what he thought was true has been wrong all along'. Greil presumes worldview shift is based upon tension between reality and perceived ideal whereby an individual looks for answers to a presenting problem to/through social reference groups.

resolution of cognitive dissonance. Converts seek after cognitive consistency to achieve balance through social belonging and subsequent belief. However, his theory differs from Gartrell and Shannon in that resolution of cognitive state is not conscious, rational deliberation but rather 'a reflexive reaction to a psychologically stressful state'. These researchers agreed that when an individual's worldview is intellectually challenged, he/she may be compelled to seek a more satisfying explanation, driving an active search for answers, meaning and change towards a set of religious beliefs.

Further, as converts seek a new perspective, intellectual congruence between two ideologies plays a role in religious conversion. Individuals willing to explore alternative explanations may be limited by intellectual congruity between their existing worldview and the new religious perspective. An individual's base knowledge guides their religious search and their presuppositions restrict the range of plausible religious options. Individuals are more likely to seek after certain kinds of statements, arguments or positions that are within a familiar explanatory system (Heirich, 1977, Greil, 1977, Richardson, 1985). However, ideological congruence is not always necessary. Greil (1977) argued prior dispositions do not determine conversion. In circumstances where the felt need for a new viable perspective was urgent (such as life crisis), presuppositions played a less restricting role. Due to social interaction, the range of exposure to new perspectives is virtually unlimited. Individuals could convert from any worldview to any other as long as they encountered persons who share that new perspective. When ideological congruence exists, it serves as a facilitative rather than a necessary role in conversion.

While researchers acknowledge the role of intellectual sense-making in religious conversion, it has often been in the context of relationship to sociological factors. First, some researchers deem social influence as the major variable in conversion rather than viewing converts as intentional seekers after a change in perspective (Seggar and Kunz 1972; Austin 1977; Greil 1977). In their study of Mormon converts, Seggar and Kunz (1972) found positive, intensive interaction with the new group as fostering conversion. Many of their

converts are unaware of Mormon beliefs before conversion, reinforcing the dominant role of social over cognitive influences. Snow and Phillips (1980) elevated social interaction as essential in conversion, declaring religious conversion as highly improbable without the situational conditions of affective, intensive interaction between the potential convert and the new religious group. Through an 18-month immersion into an American Buddhist movement, they interviewed 15 converts and examining 504 testimonies from 1966-1974. Their research showed that 82% of potential converts developed affective bonds with the recruiting religious group before conversion. This bond bridged the information gap between the potential convert's existing and new ideology, increasing not only the new worldview's credibility but also the social pressure to conform. Without such affective bond, the likelihood of religious conversion decreased. Neither ideological congruence nor active questing were necessary components in their view.

Secondly, researchers contend that positive or negative social interaction with the religious group influences acceptance or rejection of religious belief (Greil, 1977, Gartrell and Shannon, 1985). Greil (1977) maintained strong affective bonds increased the chance of conversion and openness to the adoption of and belief in a new worldview. Conversely, social or emotional absence weakened affective bonds and discredited potential convert belief. For Gartrell and Shannon (1985) conversion is motivated by expected social and cognitive rewards, although social rewards hold priority. Strong social contacts within a new religious group increased the likelihood of belief and conversion, whereas strong social contacts outside of the group decreased the likelihood of conversion to the new group. They advocated a Rational Choice Approach balancing social relationships, participation in religious activities, and religious content in the conversion process.

Finally, while social, affective bonds are necessary towards conversion, they may not be sufficient to effect or sustain conversion in all cases. Heirich (1977) appreciates a more integrated view of the process and implications of religious conversion. After reviewing 50 empirical studies of religious conversion, he reported the trend in research favoring

conversion as a functional, experiential phenomenon. He (1977, p. 674) argued social influence is not enough to show how a person comes to shift one's sense of root reality, stating, 'Conversion involves a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding...involves examination of core sense of reality, identifying aspects which must be responded to with the whole being and which presumably will affect action choices for the convert thereafter.' In his view, functional motivations (e.g., psychological need due to personal or societal stress; to the impact of prior social, gender, and educational conditioning; and/or, due to the influence from social, interpersonal interactions) are often attributed as primary reasons for conversion even though substantive causes (discovering truth of the new worldview and/or reporting a spiritual experience) may be significant. Heirich (1977, p. 656) clarified, 'Believers usually develop a series of causal arguments about how God works, whereas social scientists have tended to explain the phenomenon as a subset of psychological or social processes observable more generally.'²⁷ He concluded that functionally-driven explanations are inadequate to account for the reason(s) individuals' shift in 'root reality' and limit the range of causes and circumstances precipitating conversion. Therefore, he advocated for including substantive belief content for showing how converts shift their understanding of the world under the influence of others. Heirich claimed, 'To be convincing, any causal argument should have to show links between content and experience.' Further, he (Heirich, 1977, pp. 673-675) encouraged a greater understanding of the circumstances which 'destroy clarity about root reality,' 'prompts a person's sense of ultimate reality shifting,' and 'encourages reexamination of the most basic assumptions'.

Heirich (1977) tested religious conversion motivations through conducting 310 interviews evaluating the influence of stress, socialization, and social influence on

²⁷ HEIRICH, M. 1977. Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion. *American Journal of Sociology*, 12, 653-680. Comparison between converts and non-converts regarding the same influences was notably lacking in the literature. Per Heirich, for those studies which included a control sample (Kildahl 1965; Allison 1968) or deconversion sample (Kotre 1971), no significant differences in unusual or stressful personality styles, childhood/adolescent religious exposure, social support, or stress patterns were observed.

conversion.²⁸ He defined conversion as ‘a fairly radical reorientation of religious understandings of God, personal behavior, and challenges of accepting new belief as well as a continuing religious quest for the majority of converts’ (Heirich, p. 661). Social influences showed ‘the route of the religious seeker’, but they were not adequate to explain how or what motivates a person towards a religious quest or a religious response. His results also suggested contact alone is not enough to produce a conscious shift in a core sense of reality and subsequent life choices. New converts ‘usually make a major examination of the claims or encounters which underlie the symbols and activities involved’. In response, Heirich suggested a systematic approach to determine social, psychological and divine influences as mutual interacting forces moving a person towards conversion. Heirich’s admonition opened the door towards broadening the scope of potential integrative causes and fostering a ‘thicker’ conception of religious conversion. Lofland and Skonovd (1981) acknowledged that belief is deemphasized within relativistic cultures in which ‘all systems of social knowledge and beliefs are sustained by an underlying sentimental order’...when ‘Truth is a function of what is defined as such in the individual’s social and emotional milieu making it common for people to participate actively in their new roles as converts in advance of their cognitive assent to its theological implications.’ As an example, Rambo (1993, p. 1), religious conversion and its associated beliefs are primarily a socially constructed phenomenon, mediated through people, institutions, communities, and groups.

[It is] what a group or person says it is. The process of conversion is a product of the interactions among the convert’s aspirations, needs, and orientations, the nature of the group in which she or he is being converted, and the particular social matrix in which these processes are taking place.

²⁸ Ibid. Heirich evaluated the influence of stress (e.g., pre-conversion stressful circumstances, major role shifts, parental education), socialization (e.g., religious roles, parochial education, birth order, prior religious practice), and immediate social influence (e.g., person who introduced the new religious paradigm, friendship history with religious adherents, frequency of worship attendance). Findings revealed the roles of stress and prior socialization had little bearing on religious conversion; however, the impact of social influence bore greater influence upon a potential convert than one’s psychological state or prior socialization, particularly if such individual was actively seeking towards a change in religious perspective. Immediate personal relationships also influenced persons who were not actively seeking; however, contact alone was insufficient to produce a change of heart.

Religious conversion demands intellectual assent as well as social conformity, existential trust, and radical life transformation within a lived reality. While some researchers value sociological variables as primary in changing 'root reality', others deem cognitive dissonance, intellectual congruence, and grounded belief as key factors in the conversion process. The question remains as to what role belief plays as the convert discovers and resolves life's mysteries through conversion. If religion answers profound explanations for ultimate reality, it begs the question as to whether or not belief content is a viable and verifiable part of religion and religious conversion or instead merely illusory, psychologically or socially motivated. Further, what, if any, is the role does transcendent experience play, if any, in conversion?

1.3.5. Conversion as a Spiritual Phenomenon

From the Enlightenment until the first half of the twentieth century, academia chiefly conceived religious conversion as an individual, human-generated product motivated by an underlying psychological need. At the turn of the twentieth century, psychologist William James undertook the grandiose task of defining and explaining religion. James's definitive work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, served as a prominent voice for the reductionist approach and forged the path upon which many researchers followed - that it is within functional realities that religious belief and experience are best understood. He thought religion was best known through removing its institutionalized elements (ecclesiology, theology, philosophy, ideas, and beliefs) and keeping only its personal aspects. For James (1902, p. 21), religion entailed 'the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine'. Immediate feelings and experiences mediated and informed rationality as well as all non-spiritual and spiritual truth. A person's subconscious, emotional, and non-rational self knows, understands, and defines what is religious and what is to be believed. James recognized the mystical experience as characterized by its ineffability, transiency, noetic nature, a perceived divine-human encounter. Yet, he deemed philosophic tests for truth and

beliefs (such as intuition, authority, supernatural revelations) as destructive and insufficient to discriminate fraud from the truth. For James, the surest evidence of authentic religion manifests through an 'empiricist criterion'. That is, a genuine religious experience results in the embodiment of a productive religious life.

Similarly, researchers have approached religion with religious experience as reduced to merely subjective human construction. In contemporary Western culture's increasingly secularized context, 'demythologized' religion dismisses supernatural content. Rambo (1999, p. 264) maintained that spirituality plays a motivational role in the conversion process as well as an area of inquiry for the conversion researcher. In his view, 'Scholars in human sciences - almost without exception - neglect, trivialize, or totally reject the role of religion and spirituality in their theories of conversion,' and in doing so, researchers avoid assessing the content of [to] what one converts'. Gooren (2007) reviewed conventional approaches to conversion (from 1965-2004) and confirmed the overwhelming emphasis on the functional approach, diminishing substantive content.²⁹ He (p. 348) observed that in previous studies 'almost all of the conversion approaches ... conform to the typical social science bias of tending to reduce religion to social-economic or psychological factors. Most approaches ignore what people believe in, why this is so important to people'. This reduction may reflect ideological bias, skepticism towards knowledge of the 'non-empirical' prevailing relativism, and cultural disdain. It inevitably shapes the conception and research of religious conversion, reinforcing a diminished plausibility and reality of religious experience and belief. Religious conversion becomes flattened to a natural process or event. Religion itself becomes lost.

Further, dismissing spiritual experiences *a priori* due to naturalistic presumptions discounts converts' narrative accounts and undercuts a potential motivating factor towards religious conversion. Two explanations for spiritual experiences are possible, according to

²⁹ GOOREN, H. 2007. Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Toward a New Synthesis. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 46, 337-353. Gooren discerns study limitations including disciplinary biases such as psychologists' focus upon personality and crisis, sociologists' focus upon social networks and institutional influences, and anthropologists' focus upon social and cultural factors.

Lewis (1940, p. 556): ‘Numinous awe’ can be explained as either ‘a mere twist in the human mind, corresponding to nothing objective and serving no biological function...or else it is a direct experience of the really supernatural.’³⁰ For the convert, the experience may be perceived as Lewis puts forth, ‘a direct experience of the supernatural’. Within a reductionistic paradigm, religious belief and spiritual experience loses plausibility and place within conversion research, tacitly dismissed due to *a priori* naturalistic presuppositions. This approach challenges Rambo and Farhadian’s (2014, p. 4) description of religious conversion: ‘For many, conversion is a transcendent experience; for others, it comes at the cost of being shunned by the families and religious communities that once nurtured them.’ These experiences and costs suggest that transcendent experience and belief warrant consideration within religious conversion. Imposing naturalistic interpretation upon converts’ narratives of religious experience discounts emic accounts of motivation towards religious conversion. Providing ample room for persuasive spiritual experiences potentially enriches understanding of the mysterious phenomenon of conversion.

In his doctoral study of conversion to Christianity, Iyadurai (2011, p. 517; 2014, p. 3) highlighted the role of transcendent experiences. After reviewing the academic literature, he concluded that ‘Contemporary studies on conversion do not emphasize the significance ascribed by the converts to the divine element in their conversion experiences. The religious experience is central to the conversion process.’ While some studies acknowledge the presence of the divine in conversion, they ‘fail to give a significant place to religious experience even though converts attribute great significance to it’. For him, the converts’ own perspective should be considered in defining and understanding the process of conversion, including the perceived role of spiritual experience. Skeptical of supernatural experiences

³⁰ LEWIS, C. S. 1940. *The Problem of Pain*, New York, New York, HarperCollins Publishers. Lewis described the development of religion as based upon the common religious experience of numinous awe and/or an inherent sensibility of moral oughtness, producing various types of religious expression. Lewis specifically uses the term ‘numinous awe’ as a feeling universal to humanity. Numinous awe along with a universal sense of moral oughtness leads to four types of religion or thought: Numinous awe without moral obligation produces non-moral religion (i.e., spirituality without moral accountability); moral obligation without numinous awe produces non-religious morality (e.g., ethics-based thought, Stoicism); and, numinous awe plus moral obligation (numinous power) produces moral-experiential religion (i.e., a personal, moral god).

prior to his research, by the end of his study he ‘became sympathetic to considering supernatural experiences favorably’ due to the way converts spoke and lived in light of their spiritual events. Iyadurai reported converts describing visions, dreams, felt presence or voice of God, miracles, and answered prayers as pivotal to their conversions. Within this context, Iyadurai (2014, pp. 5-7) describes the divine-human encounter as:

The turning point that occurs in the mystical states of consciousness...when an encounter with the divine occurs, the divine is identified with Jesus and converts gain a certainty of experiencing the truth and claim a special knowledge of God based on this personal experience.

The experiential evidence is forceful in converts’ articulation that the divine-human encounter is personal and unparalleled to any other experience that comes with the knowledge of God...When one returns to normal waking consciousness the previously held religious belief is discarded with a strong conviction that the newfound knowledge of God is real and true...

At the divine-human encounter, an informal conversation takes place between the divine and the convert. In this encounter, converts find unconditional love and acceptance from the divine...When converts meet God they are terribly struck by the consciousness of sin...The moment converts realize their sins, they have no hesitation to confess them and at one gain a sense of being forgiven by the divine...When the encounter is over they are filled not with remorse, but long-lasting joy, peace, and happiness.

The human-divine encounter can trigger or confirm spiritual conversion, a personal closeness with the divine, and a sense of well-being spurring transformation in all areas of life. For those seeking to understand the phenomenon of religious conversion, denying the spiritual dimension is ‘erroneous’ in his view.

1.4. Integrative Approach as Beneficial for the Conversion Researcher

Although early scholars promoted more single-focused theories for religious conversion, more recent scholarship appreciates multiple influences working together. Long and Hadden (1983) encouraged an integrative approach, seeing passive and active aspects as a ‘dual reality’ in conversion, two aspects of a multi-layered phenomenon incorporating both psychological and sociological influences. Kilbourne and Richardson, (1989, p. 16) affirmed the assimilated nature of conversion, stating, ‘Due to the inherently personal, individualized nature of religious conversion, transformation changes a person’s psycho-emotional,

experiential, and worldview perspective. Because it is also social, conversion requires a change in a person's role within a group as well as confirmation by that group of new experiences and perspectives.' Rambo and Bauman (2012) caution against a Western cultural perception of the 'isolated, autonomous person who makes decisions based on rational calculation, separate from family pressure and the constraint of traditional religion'. In their view, conversion is not a solely intellectual quest or phenomenon, but includes personal and social aspects prompting individuals to pursue a religious movement which 'provides a coherent, compelling conceptual system'. They presume a comprehensive understanding of conversion, appreciating psychological, sociological, anthropological, and divine influences.

If a comprehensive understanding of conversion is the goal, a robust understanding and inclusion of intellectual and spiritual content is beneficial for the conversion researcher. Berger (1974, p. 125) exhorted the human science community with 'one conviction' that 'the scientific study of religion must bracket ultimate truth claims implied by its subject' and apply 'logical canons of verification to empirically available phenomena' in terms of complex human experience and thought as it apprehends the transcendent. He advocated a schema for understanding religion as allowing for a balanced approach, one that incorporates both functional and substantive components. After review of literature, Heirich (1977, p. 67) was convinced of the need for widening the scope in conversion research:

Religious conversion holds far more interest than most social scientists have allowed themselves to pursue. By treating it as an odd experience (rather than as one form of a fundamental human encounter) and attempting to explain it in social-psychological terms that ignore how its content relates to the structure of larger patterns of social interaction, we have neglected much of its potential for enriching our understanding of social life more generally.³¹

³¹ HEIRICH, M. 1977. Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion. *American Journal of Sociology*, 12, 653-680. Heirich sought a more comprehensive approach, a wider focus to the study of conversion in light of the paradigm shifting from one understanding of 'root reality' (ultimate grounding) to another. He was interested in asking questions such as '(1) What circumstances destroy clarity about root reality? and (2) How is an alternative sense of grounding asserted in ways that lead various observers to take it seriously? What ingredients must it have? What must it be able to do? How is it brought to their attention? What circumstances will an alternative sense of root reality (or grounding) become widely shared?'

Rambo (1999, p. 261) commended an expanded theoretical view of conversion beyond individual disciplinary perspectives to promote understanding of the dynamic processes and patterns of religious change. In his opinion, the student of conversion should be mindful of various aspects of a particular theory, including its origin, ideological dimension, potential biases, and consequences as well as its strengths and weaknesses:³²

The use of theory is a human attempt to intellectually grasp the meaning of important phenomena. If there is no analysis or critique of theories and theory building, we may only discover what we are looking for. We reduce complex phenomena to 'bite sized nuggets' that we can consume and dismiss with little thought. Theory creation and evaluation requires an explicit articulation of what is included in and what is excluded from a particular theory...

If we learn to view theories as important, but limited, tools of human understanding and explanation, we can approach a phenomenon, such as conversion, with humility and expand our understanding rather than merely reinforce our own expectations and biases.

For Rambo (1999, pp. 261, 267), integrative theories of conversion produce models reflective of its comprehensive, complex nature. In an attempt to 'be inclusive of a variety of factors and forces operative in religious change', Rambo seeks a 'suggestive, not constricting' model of religious conversion, as 'a heuristic device used to organize the complex field of conversion studies'. Research 'must take into account not only the personal dimension, but also the social, cultural, and religious dynamics in which a person is embedded...the relevance of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and religious studies must be acknowledged and explored'. Stark and Finke (2000, pp. 21, 38-39, 56) recognized a growing trend in the literature refuting the prevailing functional biases while affirming the productive,

³² RAMBO, L. R. 1999. Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change. *Social Compass*, 46, 259-271. Rambo discussed a wide range of religious conversion theories: (1) globalization theory - global communication, mobility, etc. increases exposure to religious movements; (2) post-colonial - imperialism and colonization promotes religious change; (3) feminist - importance of gender in religion; (4) Cross-cultural - Western ideologies' dominant perceptions of conversion need more global perspective; (5) Religious/spiritual - role of religious desires and experiences considered; (6) Intellectualist - Humans actively seek to understand, explain, predict and control their world; (7) Narrative - Conversion is the adoption of a new story and its incorporation into one's life; (8) Identity theory - Religion provides a personal, stable framework to counter the flux and fragmentation of the world; (9) Ritual theory - Rituals create, shape, and sustain religious belief and experience; (10) Psychoanalytic - Conversion is a constraint against powerful, pathologic desires (Freud); (11) Archetypal - Conversion occurs through captivation by powerful religious symbols or experiences that meet personal need (Jung); (12) Attribution - Conversion is motivated by quest for meaning, purpose, making sense of life, the nature of God, others, and self; (13) Attachment - Conversion is a result of compensation for or congruence with parental relationship; (14) Process/stage - acknowledges the dynamic, complex, multi-layered process of conversion; (15) Islamization - conversion influenced by Islamic social, cultural, religious and/or political environments.

virtuous role of religion in the lives of individuals and societies. They advocated for a broadened scope of study that includes basic rationality in religious faith as used in all human decision making, contending against bias, stating:

In the end, what distinguishes the scientific from the old Atheistic approach to religion is fundamentally a matter of motives. As social scientists, our purpose should neither be to discredit religion nor to advance a religion of science. Rather, our fundamental question is to apply social scientific tools to the relationship between human beings and what they experience as divine.³³

Resisting reductionism, Gooren (2007, p. 348) advocated an integrated approach stating, ‘Social science approaches to conversion would benefit greatly from the input of theology and mission studies to balance their tendency to reduce religion to other societal or psychological factors’.³⁴ In response, Gooren promotes a conversion model incorporating personal, experiential, social, cultural, and intellectual (‘institutional beliefs’) elements along with recognition of radical change in worldview and identity. More recently, Rambo and Farhadian (2014, p. 12) also argued for multidimensional research as the way forward in furthering understanding the integrated nature of conversion:

Conversion studies should expand its horizons and include relevant disciplines in order to plumb the depths of human communities, cultures, experience, action, and consciousness. The topic of religious conversion requires the resources of various disciplines in order to understand the multiple factors and dimensions that intersect in religious and spiritual phenomena...

Scholars, therefore, must be encouraged to be open to perspectives that, while very different, offer valuable insights into the complex phenomena under examination.

These recommendation towards adopting a more comprehensive scope of study, including both functional and substantive aspects of religion, fits well with the aim of this research. Without an inclusive, integrated view of religious conversion, the costs are considerable:

³³ FINKE, R. S. A. R. 2000. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, London, England, University of California Press. The authors are known for studying religious belief based upon their thesis that religious belief and behavior is based on cost/benefit calculation and is rational in the same sense that other human behavior is rational. They asserted a basic principle of human rationality - that humans make rational choices within the limits of their information, understanding, and options, guided by their preferences and tastes in to achieve the desired goal; and that this applies to all life decisions, including religious choices.

³⁴ GOOREN, H. 2007. Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Toward a New Synthesis. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 46, 337-353. Gooren acknowledged, however, that some models of study value belief content, such as the rational choice models.

unique distinctions of transcendent religious belief and experience are effectively lost when conversion is seen through a reductionist paradigm. In turn, the conversion researcher benefits from using an inclusive paradigm for investigation.

1.4.1. Research Benefit: Etic Appreciation of a Complex Phenomenon

Changing beliefs naturally includes both functional and substantive influences. Michael Polanyi (1958) and Thomas Kuhn (1962) both recognized the combined roles non-rational and rational influences play in ideological shifts as experimental biases and personal commitments contribute to the promotion or resistance of conflicting paradigms. Similarly, change of religious worldview involves both rational and non-rational processes. Naugle (2002, pp. 268-270) claimed that worldviews (religious or otherwise) define commitment of both mind and heart. Naugle identified the ‘heart...[as] ‘the central defining element of the human person’...the ‘primary faculty of thought, affection, and will’, and the ‘religious, intellectual, affective, and volitional center of a person’. In other words, a worldview is more than an abstract thesis about the nature of reality but is rather an expression of the condition of the whole person. As in scientific paradigm shifting, the mind and heart – or, in the terms used throughout this thesis, the Substance and Function of religious belief - are inextricably related, both warranting attention in religious conversion. For Kling (2014, p. 599), religious conversion [to Christianity] entails ‘a turning, allegiance, or commitment to Christ, in whom salvation is promised’. Conversion is, therefore, a process whereby an existential commitment follows belief in what and who is believed as real and true. The nature of Christianity contends for an integrated appreciation of its spiritual, intellectual, experiential, and functional elements. Yet, this inclusive view holds tension with contemporary notions regarding the nature of religious conversion. If conversion is primarily viewed as self- or socially-generated by immanent, ordinary, functional realities, there is little or no capacity for what Berger (1974) describes as the transcendent otherness of religious experience, for potential ‘breaches of the ordinary in order to encounter paramount reality’.

Further, functionally dominant approaches lack the foundation upon which religious paradigms can be uniquely differentiated and defined. Reduced conceptions of religious conversion potentially disregard particularities of belief and ‘flatten’ religious distinctions, reducing explanatory power and process of conversion. All cats become grey. Without such distinction, all worldviews - religious or not - suffer the same dilution and loss. Truth claims and belief content become irrelevant and relativized apart from what functionally motivates conversion. However, to prematurely dismiss the content of substantive beliefs commits a genetic fallacy, declaring an idea – here, religious belief - as accepted or rejected because of its functional source, rather than its substantive merit. When substance is removed from evaluation, the question perpetually remains as to whether conversion occurs based on convinced belief, spiritual experience, merely socio-cultural and psycho-emotional reasons, or an integration. An inquiry is needed to consider what extent belief content and spiritual experience play a role in religious conversion. Investigating conversion below the surface of functional process serves as a potential advantage for the researcher in enriching a comprehensive understanding, description, and assessment of a complex phenomenon. Including belief and spirituality in conversion research provides greater clarity in describing the religious conversion process, brings religious group distinctions to light, and grants the researcher greater evaluative capacity in studying conversion. It potentially illuminates and balances motivating influences and allows for a more comprehensive understanding, accounting for the whole person, of the transcendent, intellectual, social, and experiential aspects of religious conversion.

1.4.2. Research Benefit: Acknowledges the Full Emic Perspective

Prospective converts potentially test the beliefs of available worldviews in their search towards intellectual and experiential sense-making. Belief content is the foundation upon which all ideologies are built and are grounds by which religious worldview claims become definable and testable. Substance becomes important for converts considering the truth and believability of a new religious faith. Berger (1979) promotes ‘sober rational

assessment’ as the way of adjudicating the truth of varieties of religious experience through observation along with consideration of facts about the rational, contingent world:

An investigation of the truth claims of any one of them [religions] must be grounded in comparative and historical analysis. Christianity is not an exception to this. It is one of the historically available religious forms, analyzable by the same empirical and phenomenological methods as all other forms.

Although investigating truth claims for religious beliefs may seem counterintuitive, Newbigin (1986, pp. 17-18) highlights its importance for those individuals and religious groups who value a correspondence of beliefs to observable - and in some cases, testable – reality:

Religious experience occurs in the sanctuary, but its claim to truth has to be tested in the public world of facts where scientific disciplines operate. Individual religions may have value for those who prefer them and are to be respected as such. But claims to truth have to be tested in the public world where the principles of modern science operate.³⁵

For converts who think truth is a critical factor in accepting or rejecting a particular worldview, disregarding belief content potentially devalues the emic view of conversion. Rambo’s asserts (2014, p. 8), ‘the centrality of how people engage in discourse about their religious journeys is extremely important’. Religious conversion entails not only holding to certain beliefs but also the possibility of a spiritual encounter with the divine. Yet, conversion narratives are lost to secularized framing when belief content and transcendent experiences are dismissed. They may serve as a convincing ‘real’ influence towards belief according to the convert but become naturally-based subjective constructions through a limiting functional framework. In sum, the emic perspective provides the insider view as to motivations, influences, and process of ‘religious journeying’. The emic voice should be heard, whether regarding issues of intellectual belief, spiritual experience, or any other functional aspect of conversion.

³⁵ In the context of this thesis, naturalistic Atheism and Christianity both value and contend for objective truth claims as supporting their worldviews. Although Atheism is not considered a religious position, it is a view of the world holding to certain presuppositions regarding reality.

1.5. Conclusion

This chapter considered a portion of thesis question A1, the extent to which the academic literature addressed integrative description and conception of religious conversion in Western culture. While the academic literature historically demonstrates a dominance of the functional approach to religious conversion, recent literature encourages a more comprehensive understanding of conversion as highly diverse and multi-faceted. Inclusion of intellectual and spiritual substance as a viable component to religious conversion potentially serves as beneficial for the social science researcher towards gaining a more comprehensive understanding of a complex phenomenon in 1) defining, describing and assessing conversion; 2) expanding the scope of motivational influences towards conversion; and, 3) respecting the auto-narrative of the convert's reported motivations in relation to substantive intellectual and spiritual experiential influences.

Within the context of this thesis, ideological movement from naturalistic Atheism to Christianity includes a shift from disbelief in any form of supernatural reality to belief in a personal supernatural being who exists and to whom they owe personal allegiance towards a total transformation of life and living. Shift in belief of 'root reality' from one worldview potentially plays a critical aspect of conversion within a population of educated as well as transcendent, spiritual experiences which may contribute towards their transformation. In the next chapter, theories, motifs, and models used in previous studies of religious conversion will be explored.

2.0. RELIGIOUS CONVERSION THEORIES, MOTIFS AND MODELS:

2.1. Introduction

Models for religious conversion have been developed to conceptualize the conversion phenomenon. Early models depicting simple process patterns advance towards complex, integrated and more recently, fluid, dynamic conceptions of conversion. Contemporary multi-dimensional approaches were not present in the early theoretical or practical models but are the outcome of years of religious conversion model construction and assessment. This chapter reviews theories, motifs, and models conceptualized to represent religious conversion and concludes with a proposed Narrative Analysis Model of Religious Conversion constructed and used for narrative analysis within this thesis research study.

2.2. Simple Process Religious Conversion Models

2.2.1. Lofland and Stark's Value-Added Process Model (1965)

Early religious conversion models proposed a crisis event as the primary motivating factor towards the pursuit of a new religious perspective. Lofland and Stark observed and interviewed fifteen converts (as well as their family, friends, and work colleagues) who converted to a small, millenarian cult headquartered in Northern California, the 'Divine

Table 01. Lofland and Stark's 1965 Process Model

Lofland and Stark's 1965 Value Added Process Model	
FACTOR 1	Predisposing Conditions
FACTOR 2	Problem Solving Perspective
FACTOR 3	Seekership
FACTOR 4	Turning Point
FACTOR 5	Cult Affective Bonds
FACTOR 6	Extra-Cult Affective Bonds
FACTOR 7	Intensive Interaction

Precepts'. Founded in Korea in 1954, this group desired the complete restoration of the world to the conditions of the Garden of Eden by 1967. Lofland and Stark asked the question, 'Under what conditions and through what mechanisms did persons come to share or reject the

Divine Precepts view of the world?' For Lofland and Stark (1965), conversion was defined by 'when a person gives up one perspective or ordered view of the world for another', allowing for two degrees of conversion. They presented a Value-Added Process Model

acknowledging psycho-emotional, experiential, sociological and ideological motivations, proposing seven successively accumulating factors as necessary for conversion.³⁶ At the beginning stage, a religious seeker perceives tension or disillusionment and a 'felt discrepancy between some imaginary, ideal state of affairs and the circumstances in which these people saw themselves caught up' which 'creates a disposition to act'. This predisposed condition is followed by a situational contingency or life event prompting a turning point and increased willingness to move in another direction. If conventional solutions are inadequate, the convert actively searches for a satisfactory system of religious meaning to interpret and resolve his discontent. The convert establishes relational bonds with new religious group members and conversion becomes the natural outworking of events and newly established relationships. Lofland and Stark acknowledged the limited nature of their non-generalizable study and offered it as a reasonable starting point for conversion study.

As a testable model of religious conversion, researchers recognized Lofland and Stark's model as lacking in universal applicability. Many evaluated this crisis determinism process model and found a limited application (Seggar and Kunz, 1972; Austin, 1977; Heirich, 1977; JT Richardson, 1977; Snow and Phillips, 1980; Kox, et al., 1991, Gooren, 2007).³⁷ Regardless, Lofland and Stark's simple-process model recognized the multi-faceted nature of conversion and provided a foundation for subsequent conversion models.

³⁶ STARK, J. L. A. R. 1965. Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective. *American Sociological Review*, 30, 862-875. Lofland-Stark Process Model stages: (1) Predisposing Conditions - felt tension between a perceived ideal and real life circumstances; (2) Problem-solving perspective - secular (e.g., psychological or political remedy) or religious; (3) Seekership - Inadequate conventional solutions led to religious seeking; ideological congruence between pre-conversion worldview and new religious group; situational contingencies arise from contact and interaction between potential convert and religious group, (4) Turning Point - Convert ready to move in another direction in light of failed/disrupted 'old lines of action' and new opportunities increasing desire for change; (5) Cult Affective Bonds - new social relationships foster positive emotional bonds with new religious group followed by belief acceptance; (6) Extra-Cult Affective Bonds - extra-cult relationships positively and/or negatively influenced conversion; (7) Intensive Interaction - total conversion depended upon close engagement and intensive interaction with the group.

³⁷ KUNZ, J. S. A. P. 1972. Conversion: Evaluation of a Step-like Process for Problem-Solving. *Review of Religious Research*, 13, 178-184. John Seggar and Phillip Kunz tested the Lofland-Stark religious conversion model for general applicability by studying 77 converts to Mormonism. Their findings did not support Lofland-Stark's problem-solving paradigm (e.g., the converts were not active seekers; life problems did not serve as primary precipitators towards conversion; if negative life events occurred, most sought secular remedy; majority experienced a gradual process advanced through conducive social and psychological conditions).

AUSTIN, R. L. 1977. Empirical Adequacy of Lofland's Conversion Model. *Review of Religious Research*, 18, 282-287. Roy Austin also conducted a study to assess the Lofland-Stark model by interviewing nine college-aged conversion to the 'deviant' perspective of 'born-again' Christianity. He found the model inadequate to explain the necessity of an internal tension and/or turning point events, religious problem-solving perspective or active religious seeking as the primary precipitating factors towards religious conversion. Austin's study affirmed the need for initiation and continuation of social

2.3. Complex Process Religious Conversion Theories and Models

2.3.1. Richardson's Conversion Career Model (1977)

After Lofland and Stark's pioneering model, sociologically-driven conversion paradigms began to emerge in the 'age of conversion'.³⁸ During this time, the traditional understanding of conversion as a one-time event or process changed towards seeing it as a more complex phenomenon. Researchers evaluated various process models of conversion and confirmed conversion as a multi-event phenomenon rather than a single occurrence (Richardson, 1977, Greil and Rudy, 1984).³⁹ Richardson (1977), sought to expand limited models into a more generalized model through incorporating types and processes of conversion over time constituting a 'conversion career'. His model incorporated past (prior socialization), present (contemporary experiences and circumstances), and present/future (structure for problem definition and resolution). In Richardson's paradigm, negative life circumstances prompt potential converts to move towards resolution within available ideological alternatives. Individuals decide to behave as a convert, playing the convert role, as they test or affirm their personhood during attempted problem-solving.⁴⁰ Affective and

relationships for maintenance of new religious beliefs. The only necessary condition for conversion, according to Austin, was the presence of intense interaction between the potential convert and the religious adherent. However, he made the distinction between those who had a prior belief in God as requiring only the final three socialization steps and those who had no prior belief in God as requiring six of seven conditions (all but turning point).

HEIRICH, M. 1977. Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion. *American Journal of Sociology*, 12, 653-680. (1977) Max Heirich judged the Lofland-Stark model to be inadequate in its lack of explanation as to why any worldview is attractive to a potential convert, it did not account for the range of circumstances precipitating conversion and ignored the nature of conversion.

GOOREN, H. 2007. Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Toward a New Synthesis. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 46, 337-353. This model, according to Gooren, outlined the primary factors in conversion as social networks, personality (which informs felt tensions, problem-solving perspective, and active/passive tendencies), and the turning-point experience. For Gooren, this and other 'crisis determinism' models were too restrictive in their motivational impetus toward conversion.

³⁸ RICHARDSON, J. T. 1977. Conversion Process Models and the Jesus Movement. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 20, 819-838. The 'age of conversion' was designated during the 1960's and 1970's in the United States with the sweeping influence of Jesus Movement as well as other cult movements.

³⁹ RUDY, A. L. G. A. D. R. 1984. What Have We Learned from Process Models of Conversion? *Sociological Focus*, 17, 305-323. Problems with process models: Process models did not incorporate group affiliation as part of process analysis; 'true' conversion (evoking radical change) was confused with mere alternation and affiliation; and, post-conversion accounts were potentially biased by new post-conversion perspectives (e.g., biographical reconstruction rather than recollection of pre-conversion reality).

⁴⁰ RICHARDSON, J. T. 1977. Conversion Process Models and the Jesus Movement. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 20, 819-838. Richardson acknowledged a fluidity of ideologies within a pluralistic marketplace of ideas, including a widely diverse range of interpretations of and resolutions to felt problems. More than merely 'secular' or 'religious' perspectives for problem solving, he included psychiatric, political, physiological and conventional means of problem solving.

emotional ties are influential as the potential convert participates, negotiates, and commits to a religious group.⁴¹

2.3.2. Straus's Personal and Collective Conversion Process (1979)

Straus (1979) perceived conversion as a dynamic social process between individuals and groups. Social actors actively construct and reconstruct social and phenomenological

Table 02. Straus's 1979 Conversion Process Model

Straus 1979 Personal and Collective Conversion Process	
STEP 1	Seeker actively looks for help.
STEP 2	Engages with new group members, bonds, language and worldview.
STEP 3	Accepts new norms through active belief and commitment.
STEP 4	Works to make conversion 'real' to self and others.
STEP 5	Masters new practices, experiences new identity.
STEP 6	Ongoing individual and collective action to 'keep reality real'.

realities within a particular group. Potential converts seek and engage with new group experiences and practices as formalized within the new group and sustain new identity and beliefs

through ongoing active engagement and participation to 'keep reality real'.

2.3.3. Lofland and Skonovd's Conversion Motifs (1981)

After recognizing his prior Value-Added Process Model failed to appreciate the individualized, complex nature of religious conversion, Lofland (1981) expanded his earlier model by adding a variety of conversion profiles. Lofland and Skonovd's six conversion motifs included intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive. This model considers variables of social pressure, temporal duration, affective arousal, affective content as well as belief-participation sequence. All conversion motifs acknowledge belief-participation sequence whether belief was established prior to belonging to the new group, grew during experimental participation with the group over time, or, were driven by affectional social and emotional factors through group participation. In the Intellectual

Interestingly, Richardson perceived fundamental Christianity as counter-cultural within modern society and potentially provoking greater tension-producing problems.

⁴¹ Ibid. Richardson found that those with weak social/affective ties with non-group members were more likely to convert to a new group. Alternatively, non-group members who encouraged an individual's conversion to a new group precipitated it; non-group disapproval discouraged it.

Motif, the convert independently acquires a new set of religious beliefs before becoming engaged with a religious group.⁴²

Table 03. Lofland and Stark's 1981 Motifs

Lofland and Skonovd 1981 Conversion Motifs	
MOTIF 1	Intellectual
MOTIF 2	Mystical
MOTIF 3	Experimental
MOTIF 4	Affectional
MOTIF 5	Revivalist
MOTIF 6	Coercive

The Coercion Motif acknowledges belief content insofar as it is manipulated through highly intense totalitarian cult mind control and brainwashing. Mystical and Revivalist Motifs recognize spiritual experience with conversion portrayed as a dramatic experience evoking heightened emotion (such as awe, love, fear) and

onset or intensification of belief outside or in the context of social pressure. Within the remaining two motifs, belief followed social and emotional belonging. Experimental Motif is a curiosity-driven approach where converts participate in a religious group and gradually experiences a transformation of identity, behavior, and worldview. For the Affectional Motif, social or emotional factors drive belief change. As the convert is attracted to person(s) in the religious group, social knowledge and beliefs are sustained by personal attachments to or strong liking for practicing believers. Admirably, these motifs appreciated diversity within religious conversion and encouraged a broadened, more individualized view of conversion.

2.3.4. Kilbourne and Richardson's Conversion Typology (1989)

Kilbourne and Richardson (1989) viewed religious conversion as inherently human, social, and interactive between individuals and social contexts. In their view, conversion requires three socio-psychological events - individual experience, effect on self, and social group confirmation of experiences and effects. Identifiable elements confirming conversion include change in discourse, convert role, and change in worldview perspective. Their religious conversion paradigm incorporates active vs. passive and inter- vs. intra-individual contrasts in the context of social contexts and influences:

⁴² SKONOVD, J. L. A. N. 1981. Conversion Motifs. *Society for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 20, 373-385. They attributed a rise in intellectual motif conversions with increased privatization of religion, pluralism, and technology (encouraging a 'disembodied' communication) within Western culture.

Table 04. Kilbourne and Richardson's 1989 Conversion Typology

Kilbourne and Richardson 1989 Conversion Typology		
	Active	Passive
Intra-Individual	Intellectual or Self (humanistic theory)	Mystical Belief Change Affectional Psychopathologic (psychological determinism)
Inter-Individual	Experimental Social Drift (interactionist theories) (role theory)	Revivalist Socialization Deprivation Coercive (social-environmental determinism)

Although socially-driven, this model incorporates substantive content in the Intellectual and Mystical components. Kilbourne and Richardson recognized the unique variability of conversion, further substantiating the need for an enlarged, flexible conception of conversion.

2.4. Expanding Religious Conversion Models

Over time, socially negotiated conversion models expanded to incorporate multi-disciplinary, integrated perspectives. Conversion researchers began to further appreciate the complex phenomenon of conversion.

2.4.1. Rambo's Sequential Stage Model (1993)

In an attempt to distance from 'disciplinary myopia' and 'ideological encapsulation', Rambo (1989) advocated for a comprehensive model of conversion. His paradigm includes multidimensional aspects (such as cultural, social, personal/psychological, and religious dimensions), historical contexts (appreciating change over time, places, and people groups), as well as process (including flexible stages of conversion). Rambo (1989, p. 60) also promoted including theological aspects of conversion, stating:

I would hope that scholars in the human sciences would become more interested in the religious dimensions of conversion and that theologically oriented students of conversion would take more seriously the rich particulars, complexities, and varieties of the process of human transformation.

Four years later, Rambo (1993, p. xii) re-emphasized his point defining genuine conversion as 'a total transformation of the person by the power of God' which 'occurs through the mediation of social, cultural, personal and religious forces,' as 'radical, striking to the root of

the human predicament.’⁴³ Rambo adopted a descriptive approach addressing the nature of the process of conversion, including perceived experiences as well as change in behaviors and beliefs as actively constructed by the convert, rather than ideology. He did not use a normative approach as formulated through the theological convictions of a particular tradition. Substantive content affirmed ‘truth’ of such content only within the relativistic coherence of belief within a particularized belief system, not in correspondence with reality. Acknowledging the inherent diversity of conversion, Rambo (1993, p. 5) claimed, ‘There is no one cause of conversion, no one process, and no one simple consequence of that process’.

Based upon this broadened understanding, Rambo constructed a sequential stage model of conversion as mediated through people, institutions, communities, and groups in a socio-cultural world. The model includes a seven-stage conversion process, allowing for various typologies (apostasy away from religion, intensification of religion, affiliation with religion, institutional transition between religions, and tradition transition within a religion). The starting point, Context, considers environments which facilitate or impede the conversion process. For Bauman and Rambo (2012, p. 882), the context ‘not only provides the social/cultural matrix which shapes a person’s myths, rituals, symbols, and beliefs, it also has a powerful impact in terms of access, mobility, and opportunity for even coming into contact with religious and spiritual options.’ Both macro-context or total environment (national/local societal, religious, and cultural beliefs, patterns, behaviors) and micro-context or the immediate social/relational world (family, friends, ethnic group, religious community, neighborhood) are deemed foundational. Beyond context, Rambo’s model depicts an interactive sequence of processes. Steps of conversion culminate over time, allowing for ‘spiraling,’ or going back and forth between stages:

⁴³ RAMBO, L. R. 1993. *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Yale University. Rambo personally believed because ‘human beings are capable of self-deception,’ and ‘our proclivities are often anti-God, we require change that is foundational and pervasive’ requiring ‘the intervention of God to deliver [us]’ from the ensnaring captivity of deception. Rambo readily admitted to and prefaced this definition with his belief endorsing the view that ‘all scholarship is ultimately a projection of one’s own personal predicaments and that whatever may be ‘theologically true’ varies among faith groups’. For Rambo, this personal definition was admittedly grounded in his ‘sectarian past’.

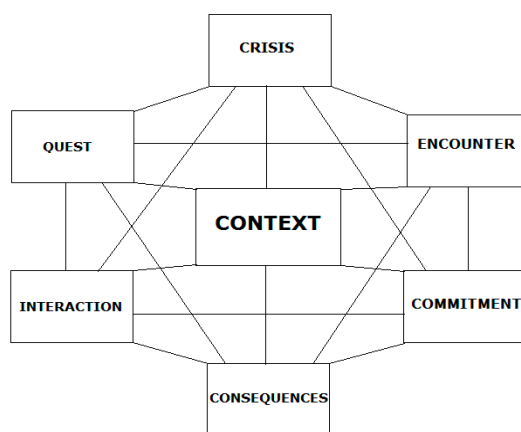


Figure 01. Rambo 1993 Sequential Stage Model

First, a Crisis event⁴⁴ (stage two) causes individuals to turn towards conversion. Crises range in severity from subtle to dramatic and serves as precipitating cause (or interactive, complex, cumulative causes) for an individual to question fundamental orientation to life. When a felt discrepancy exists between an individual's perception of the world and the sobered state of reality, an intellectual and/or existential crisis occurs creating a sense of disorientation in life. This dissonance mobilizes a person towards creating new possibilities in order to resolve the conflict (Bauman and Rambo, 2012).⁴⁵ Following the Crisis stage, the potential convert moves towards sense-making and resolution through a Quest stage (stage three), 'a process in which people seek to maximize meaning and purpose in life to fill the void', or for other possible reasons.⁴⁶ During this phase, individuals move from prior emotional, intellectual, religious commitments towards new options in order to find a substantive, satisfying belief system in which to inform and sustain functional personal, social, and emotional needs. Next, the religious seeker Encounters religious

⁴⁴ Ibid. Catalysts for crisis include mystical experiences, near-death experiences, severe illness and/or recovery, general dissatisfaction with life, desire for transcendence, satisfaction and greater meaning in life, stability in a chaotic world, search to resolve psycho-emotional problems, or external crisis events.

⁴⁵ BAUMAN, L. R. R. A. S. C. 2012. Psychology of Conversion and Spiritual Transformation. *Pastoral Psychology*, 61, 879-894. This searching after resolution can be motivated either through positive humanistic self-actualization, maturity and growth, or through negative emotional and/or psychological issues.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Bauman and Rambo cited theories of motivation: (1) Buxant, et al. (2009) delineate compensatory vs. constructive motivations; (2) Others identify one dominant motivating factor such as conflict resolution or guilt; (3) Seymour Epstein: (1985) Epstein offers four basic motivations which vary over time and circumstance, including (a) the need to acquire pleasure and avoid pain (emotional); (b) to possess a conceptual system (cognitive-intellectual); (c) to enhance self-esteem (psychological); and (d) to establish and maintain relationships (social); and, (4) Rambo adds the motivation for power to heal, to be successful, to gain control over one's life and death.

advocates (stage four). Both parties are active and passive in a dynamic process of seeking and being sought as influenced by beliefs, interests, needs, motivations, and styles of contact. If the potential convert accepts the ideas of the new religious group, a phase of increased Interaction (stage five) begins. Through ongoing affective, social, and intellectual engagement, the new convert adapts new relationships, rituals, rhetoric and roles. This process ‘encapsulates’ physically, socially, and in belief formation while the convert establishes emotional bonds and relationships, connecting them to the new community.

According to Rambo (1993), conversion occurs when a person joins a religious group, their beliefs align with religious rituals and experience, and they embrace their new religious worldview as a practical life guide. Conversion is a dynamic process of active construction between the religious group and the wishes, expectations, and aspirations of the convert. Rambo conceives of conversion as a means of solving or resolving the mystery of human origins, meaning, and destiny and providing a framework for order, meaning, and action, and acknowledges conversion as giving worldview for answering existential questions. In his view, beliefs serve the role of determining who belongs to a particularly religious group; however, he does not address the role of belief as an integral factor towards conversion. Commitment (stage six) follows when the convert encounters a specific turning point or decides towards commitment, often confirmed through ritual. The new convert begins to perceive his life through a reconstructed worldview lens as motivated by new, surrendered purposes, rejecting old for new patterns and behaviors. Finally, the convert experiences Consequences (stage seven) as determined by the nature, intensity, and duration of the conversion as well as the response of those within and outside of the religious group. For Rambo, conversion can affect various life dimensions, including emotional, intellectual, moral/ethical, religious, and social components. Rambo (1993) reported post-conversion change in approximately 200 converts to include a new relationship with God (bridging a former sense of alienation), a sense of intimacy and connection with God, relief from guilt, a new sense of mission and purpose for living, a sense of community belonging, as well as a

new intellectual understanding of the nature of reality, of history, meaning and order in the universe, of self. He advised, however, that conversion may not result in an integrated, ongoing, authentic transformation in all areas of life.

2.4.1.1. Rambo's Sequential Stage Model tested by Peter Kahn (2000; 2004)

Kahn (2000) tested Rambo's stage model with 110 adults using the Adult Religious Conversion Experiences Questionnaire adapted from Rambo's sequential stage model. He evaluated whether Rambo's theoretical framework fit conversion experiences, allowing for highly individualized sequences, variance in intensity and duration of stages, as well as types of conversion (e.g., joining or changing religious affiliation, increasing intensification in the same religion, or leaving a religious affiliation). Kahn found Crisis stage as instrumental towards conversion, whether through intrinsic need (such as desires for coping, acceptance, explanations, and solutions) or extrinsic crisis (situational experiences). In his study, religious conversion was motivated through doubt and questioning, producing openness to uncertainty, change, and learning about other worldviews. The typical convert was an active seeker, questing on a journey towards religious conversion, shaped by social and religious influences. However, Rambo's Quest dimension yielded ambiguous results in differentiating what the seeker was pursuing, whether more/new beliefs, emotional coping strategies, as a framework for meaning and living, emotional gratification, or personal power. Kahn clarified that seekers typically quested for solutions and not due to psychopathology. The Interaction phase of conversion was found to be an important, influential factor, particularly in those religions engaging with new converts slowly and deliberately rather than rapidly or impulsively. Commitment phase was validated, with higher levels of total commitment more prevalent in evangelical Protestants than other Christian and non-Christian religions. His research also substantiated Consequence stage of conversion, that religious conversion provides a sense of purpose and improved life functioning as well as strong elements of love, joy, freedom and new relationships with God, community, and self. Religious conversion also met a dysphoric need for those individuals who have experienced

longstanding relational difficulties or low self-esteem with the hope of acceptance and help from a new religion. Kahn's work confirmed the multi-dimensionality of conversion as including both substantive elements (intellectual doubt and questioning, questing for answers or new beliefs) and functional components (experiential, emotional, social, existential).

2.4.2. Gooren's Conversion Career Model (2007, 2010)

Gooren (2007) reviewed conversion research to determine critical motivational factors contributing to religious conversion and concluded that conventional approaches were fragmented and deterministic rather than holistic and multidimensional.⁴⁷ In his analysis, researcher bias reduced religion to functional socioeconomic and psychological factors while ignoring the substantive content of belief – 'what people believe and why it is important to them' with few exceptions.⁴⁸ Later, Gooren (2010b) confirmed the inadequacy of process conversion models as fixed, limiting, and invalid because patterns of conversion are more complex and heterogeneous. Further, he advocated a renewed emphasis on religious experience, formerly neglected in social science conceptions of religious conversion. Based upon his review of the literature, Gooren advocated a synthesis of approaches to include: religious experience, radical change in worldview, rational cost-benefit analysis of adapting new beliefs, changes in identity and level of religious activity, the roles of problem-solving and seeking within the context of prior cultural and religious socialization, role learning and mastering in developing religious commitment, gender role, recruiting and shaping activities, methods, and behaviors, as well as indicators of conversion. His resultant Conversion Career approach includes 'all periods of higher or lower participation in one or more religious groups during a person's life history'. It differed from Richardson's earlier sociologically-

⁴⁷ GOOREN, H. 2007. Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Toward a New Synthesis. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 46, 337-353. Conventional conversion approaches were limited due to: (1) fragmented conception of convert as either passive or active rather than a more holistic understanding; (2) confusion of religious activity with true conversion; (3) determinism that crisis precipitate conversion when control groups indicate otherwise; (4) universal conversion models have failed due to inability to apply to cross-cultural particulars, having been conceived with Christian, New Religious and/or Western biases; (5) disciplinary, age, gender, and social science biases reduced conversion to their respective ideologies.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Gooren notes exceptions to this bias as found in the Rational Choice theoretical models found in the works of Gartrell and Shannon, 1985 and Stark and Finke, 2000.

based conversion career model, allowing for multi-dimensionality and variation as the convert moves in and out of religious belief and levels of commitment.

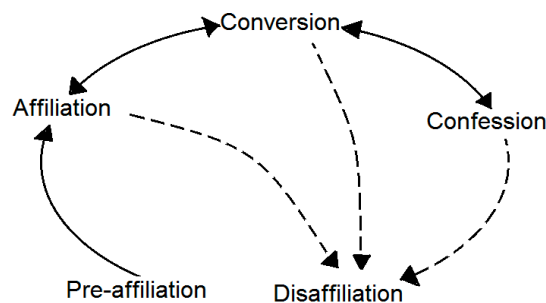


Figure 02. Gooren's Conversion Careers Model

Specifically, the Conversion Career model incorporates the main factors in conversion (contingency, individual, cultural, institutional, and social), indicators of actual conversion (changes in converts' speech and reasoning, biographical reconstruction), and indicators of post-conversion commitment. Further, this model analyzes shifts in levels of individual religious activity through life cycles designated as pre-affiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, and disaffiliation. During Pre-affiliation, the convert seeks to understand the worldview and social context of religious group members before rejoining a former, similar or different religious tradition as attended in childhood. At Affiliation, the convert becomes a formal member of a religious group, but participation is not considered a central aspect of life and identity. For Conversion, change of religious worldview and identity are based upon self-report and attribution by others. Confession reflects a high level of participation in the new religious group, and Disaffiliation designates former involvement in an organized religious group. As observed in his model, a convert may remain at any point along the spectrum from pre-affiliation to disaffiliation, may move from affiliation to deeper levels of conversion towards confession, or may move towards disaffiliation at any time.

Gooren (2010) maintains conversion is motivated primarily by dissatisfaction with a person's current religious affiliation as manifested through various means: 1) Social: influence of relatives, friends, acquaintances, and/or religious group members; 2) Institutional: dissatisfaction with current religious group or with religious inactivity; presence

of different religious groups; recruitment methods and/or appeal of religious leaders, doctrines, values, practices; 3) Cultural: appeal of culture politics on religious group; 4) Individual: personal need to become religiously involved, seek meaning and/or spirituality in a group, to change one's life situation, and/or as drawn through personal character traits towards religion; and, 5) Contingency: acute crisis or turning point, religion-based solution to the crisis, and/or change meeting with representatives of a religious group. This synthesized model provides flexibility and diversity, appreciating multiple, dynamic variables in conversion as well as change over time.

2.4.3. Rambo's New Approach to Conversion (2010)

Rambo (2010, pp. 437-438) critiqued conversion research models and methods, gaining a 'vivid awareness that human change in general, and conversion in particular, are dynamic, ongoing processes' as humans are 'always negotiating our identity and exploring new options'. In his view, the human mind, will, and emotions work together in complex ways as they engage new life experiences, relationships and ideas. Within this context, religious conversion is a highly integrative phenomenon. Corresponding research should incorporate dynamic psycho-emotional, sociological and cognitive influences as potential motivating factors. In 2010, Rambo promoted a 'New Approach' to conversion research, widening the scope to include social, psychological, historical, experiential and cultural influences as well as expectations of both convert and religious group(s).

Although Rambo considers religious conversion modeling as 'an intellectual construction designed to organize complex data and processes', he disqualifies his earlier model as universal in its application due to the increasingly dynamic, malleable, individual yet globalized, nature of conversion. For Rambo, universal, narrow, or strict conceptions are not theoretically or pragmatically feasible due to an enlarged contextual matrix and should not be generalized or used in research. Instead, he encouraged researchers to move from a universal conception of the religious conversion to allow for particularized, individual issues and experiences. He asserts (Rambo, 2010, pp. 440-449), 'Defining conversion - at least is

we mean one, precise, and universal definition – is not only impossible but is a distortion of the scientific study of religious change.’ Rather, he affirms Merrill’s ‘viable approach’ that ‘conversion is better conceived more relativistically,’ acknowledging that ‘different religions define and evaluate conversion differently’. For Rambo, conversion is ‘undergoing serious reconsideration as new methods, new religions, and new paradigms are examined’ and promotes understandings beyond Western-based religious ideological orientations and geographical locations towards a more fluid conception. He maintains a more accommodating conception of conversion allows for greater flexibility and ability to evaluate the complex, variable, interactive conversion process, that it is both necessary and appropriate in an increasingly pluralistic religious environment.

Rambo (2014) resists a normative approach – one concerned with particular theological convictions - and favors a descriptive approach focusing solely on the conversion process. However, Rambo understands that there is a certain appropriateness and legitimacy of a narrowed definition and study of conversion to certain religions at certain times and places. He also affirms the possibility of spiritual experience potentially motivating conversion, requiring explanation by scholars. Rambo queried (2010, 436):

The point is that converts convert because they believe the new religion is true, that it was ordained by God, or that it was a gift from God...The interesting questions for the scholar of conversion are, how do people acquire a new definition of the nature of truth, and how do they align themselves with that new understanding?

Rambo (2010, p. 443) further asserts the ‘crucial need’ for investigating religious beliefs as part of conversion:

It is imperative that conversion scholars devote time and energy to studying the religious content, including beliefs and practices, of the group into which and out of which a person is converting. Such research is crucial since the conversion scholar may learn about the expectations, metaphors of change, patterns of relationships within the group, and the group’s norms for who is considered a ‘real’ convert...

It may be argued that the group’s norms and theology (or ideology, if one prefers) shape consciousness and form the basis of the experience of conversion.

Within this research, there is a ‘certain appropriateness and legitimacy of a narrowed definition and study of conversion’ which must be considered, including spiritual and intellectual substance as potentially ‘forming the basis of the experience of conversion’. Particularity is warranted in light of understanding conversion motivations for resistant, educated, skeptical individuals who converts to Christianity in Western culture.

2.4.4. Iyadurai’s Step Model of Transformative Religious Experiences (2011)

Iyadurai (2011) conducted a phenomenological study of individual conversion experiences to Christianity from different religions in India.⁴⁹ Study participants included those obtained through survey (67), interview (45), focus groups (33), and available non-technical literature such as mission reports, biographies, testimonies, and news reports (20). Common themes, patterns, and phases of the conversion process were identified through which Iyadurai developed his step model. Flexibility is built into this model in order to accommodate the complexity and individuality of each conversion experience:

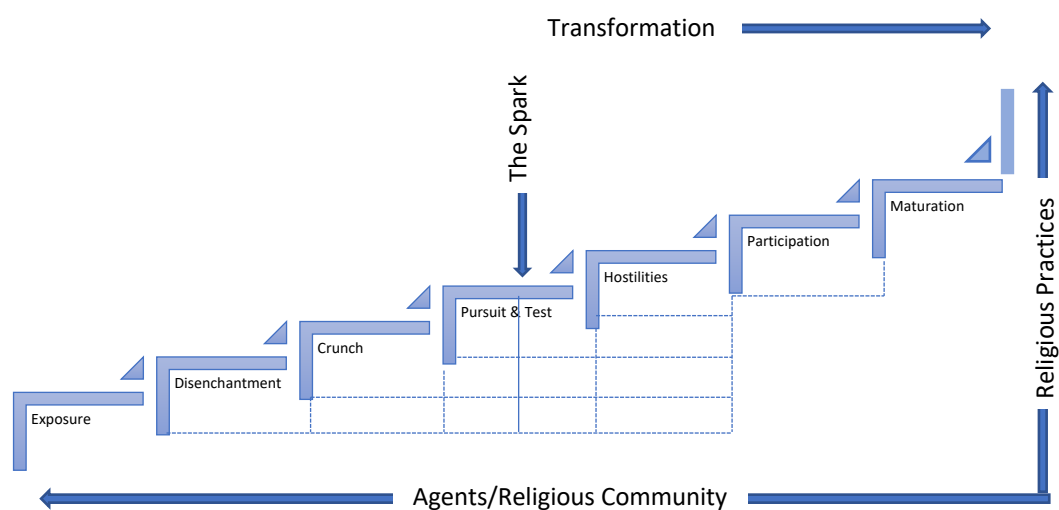


Fig. 03. Iyadurai’s Step Model of Transformative Religious Experiences

The step model of transformative religious experiences includes seven steps of different sequential phases in the conversion process. The dotted lines indicate potential skipping of some of the steps in the process. The spark identifies perceived encounter between the

⁴⁹ Religious background of participants: Hinduism (145), Islam (10), Sikhism and Tribal Religions (3), Atheism (4). Age of conversion: childhood (10), teens (66), 20s (25), 30s (13), 40s (5), 50s (1). Church affiliation: Pentecostal (48), Church of South India (38), Methodist (7), Church of North India (3), Brethren Assembly (3), other denominations (30), no church membership (0).

convert and the divine, a moment or specified event in the process, the time at which transformation begins. Social psychological and religious influences are represented through ‘agents/religious community’ and ‘religious practices’ and provide the ongoing context for conversion. The first step, Exposure, is the period in which a person becomes aware of or introduced to basic knowledge of the symbols, beliefs and practices of a religion. Next, in Disenchantment, a person becomes disillusioned with their birth religion due to spiritual, theological, social, rational, or experiential reasons, becoming open to consider or search for another option or new religion. During the Crunch phase, a difficult situation arises which causes a person to question his/her own belief system and finds it inadequate to offer a satisfying solution. Individual or cumulative Crunch episodes arise from psychological, existential, behavioral, financial, or other practical crises and serve as a catalyst towards questing. At Pursuit and Test, the potential convert then begins searching in order to find a solution to a crunch, to know more about a new religious option, and to test its ‘workability’.

The Spark could be an ordinary experience of a realization dawned upon or a supernatural experience with sensory elements and occurs before, during or after pursuit. The Spark convinces the convert of having experienced the truth, something personal with God. This divine-human encounter is the turning point and is central to conversion. In Iyadurai’s (2011, p. 518) view,

No model of religious conversion can afford to sideline this factor [the divine-human encounter] as the converts attribute great significance to it. The step model carves a significant place for the religious experience in the conversion process unlike the other models.

The Spark initiates the transformative process towards spiritual maturity. Hostilities can occur anytime during the conversion process when a person considers or accepts a new religious faith and faces adverse reactions from family and community. Prayer, Bible reading, religious community, and religious experiences support and sustain the convert during this period. Participation, the next phase of conversion, signifies the convert joining and becoming an active part of the religious community. Converts acquire a new identity,

both spiritual and personal, and consider participation in external rituals (such as baptism) to reflect their internal spiritual conversion. Finally, Maturation occurs through on-going transformation of all of life (spiritual, psychological, behavioral, physical, social, and economical), a life-long process.

For the context of this thesis, Iyadurai's model incorporates the spiritual experiential element in the conversion – not only as a component of conversion but is what he considers a central role towards life transformation. Further, his model incorporates multiple influential aspects along the conversion process, including contextual elements (social, religious community), intellectual, experiential, psycho-emotional (causing disenchantment, crunch), active seeking, personal encountering of the divine sparking spiritual and life transformation. His understanding of transformation potentially informs the concept of biographical reconstruction as promoted by other conversion researchers.

2.5. Conclusion

Considering thesis question A1, a review of the academic literature demonstrates an increasing appreciation for an integrated approach to conception and study of conversion, including beliefs and spiritual experience. The theories, motifs, and models reviewed in this chapter reflect a growing awareness of the highly variable context and nature of religious conversion for individuals during unique episodes as well as over their life span. While substantive content of belief has been recognized, it has generally been in the context of acceptance and conformity to group norms rather than engaging the veracity of the beliefs themselves as part of the conversion process. Similarly, while spiritual or mystical elements have been acknowledged in conversion motifs (Lofland and Stark, 1981) or typology (Kilbourne and Richardson 1989), only Iyadurai (2011) placed the 'divine-human encounter' as central to conversion. The next chapter introduces and discusses narrative analysis as an appropriate qualitative form of study conveying the storied nature of conversion as well as biographical reconstruction of converts as an indication of conversion.

3.0. THE NARRATIVE APPROACH and RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

3.1. Introduction

Yamane (2000, 174-176, 179) argues traditional quantitative and qualitative measures stand as inadequate to capture the complex nature of religious conversion. Whereas traditional quantitative measurements do not provide an adequate interpretation of human feeling, experience, and meaning of the conversion, traditional qualitative measurement is concerned with description and classification rather than measurement and cause. Both fail to appreciate the complexity of linguistic expressions of the conversion. Further, closed-ended questioning filters what is made possible through narrative expression. Instead of these traditional measures and interpretations, he advocates a narrative approach as ‘the right tool for the right job’. In his view, religious conversion is studied only through retrospective reflection upon and expression of the lived experience, and researchers should attend to the way people make sense of and convey their experiences through language, particularly through narratives – a ‘linguistically oriented interpretive sociology’.

Stories are the most natural way we understand and talk about our lives. They are natural expressions of recounting the substance of daily experience, relationships, knowledge, perspectives, and emotions. Hindmarsh (2014, p. 360) claimed, ‘Life possesses a pre-narrative capacity in that we are writing a kind of story, filling an implicit narrative, achieving the life stories we value’. Stories provide a framework upon which to attach life experiences, to make sense of ourselves, of others, and our world - weaving past events, present experiences, and future expectations into a dynamic, purpose-led direction. ‘Stories provide the context upon which basic facts are placed and given their meaning and significance’ (Goldberg, 2001, p. 63). Further, narratives are not merely ‘telling of a story’ but are simultaneously the ‘telling of the story-teller’ revealing their basic understanding of life and reality. Moreover, the act of story-telling itself contributes to the transformation of the story-teller, infusing new meaning, identity, and purpose.

What is true of life narratives likewise applies to religious conversion. An individual's life is a continuous narrative of which conversion stories belong. An authentic view of religious conversion appreciates its storied nature. Hindmarsh (2014, p. 345) remarks, 'When we ask a person why they converted to a particular religious community, we are not surprised to receive a narrative in response, and, indeed, a narrative often serves as a satisfying form of explanation. It is a natural progression for religious conversion to lead to a conversion narrative'. Conversion implies change, conveying where we have been, who we are, what we think and value, where we are going, and what has changed. A personal narrative provides a natural way toward recounting personal life experience, beliefs, and change within a larger religious story. It has been said (Anonymous), 'No one holds beliefs in a vacuum, but convictions are wrapped in a story of how they got there and why they believe what they believe'. Within this context, a narrative approach provides value to the researcher in appreciating the storied nature of religious conversion and providing a natural and comprehensive portrayal of the conversion phenomenon.

3.1.1. Purpose and Structure of Chapter

This chapter provides a foundational literature review of the narrative approach to religious conversion. First, the basics of general and personal narrative are discussed including description, structure, and form. This fundamental understanding of story is then applied to religious conversion narratives, including their transformational capacities. Next, different forms of narrative analyses for religious conversion are reviewed. Finally, existing narrative analysis models are reviewed, and a new narrative analysis model is presented highlighting the biographical reconstruction nature of religious conversion.

3.2. The Nature of General Narrative

Stories are the fabric of life, culture, communication, and learning. From infancy throughout childhood to adulthood, stories saturate our lives. 'We humans are by nature and description *homo narrans* or *homo fabulans*, the teller and interpreters of narrative' (Brown & Nandhakumar, 2008, p. 1035). Goldberg (2001, p. 90) claims that the possibility of

referring to a life and not simply to a ‘random bunch of experiences and events’ requires narrative structure to frame life experiences and events. Griffiths (2001, pp. 219, 223) defines narrative as ‘an ordered representation of a series of events or states of affairs that makes it possible for a listener to perceive as meaningful in a way not otherwise possible.’ It is upon this broadened perspective of story as a familiar conveyer of information that the formal definition, pattern, forms, and context of narrative are considered within academic scholarship.

3.2.1. Narrative Definition and Structure

Historically, definition and structure of narrative changed over time from a classic view towards a post-modern understanding. Within academic literature, the term narrative means ‘relating or telling’ (derived from the Latin *narrare*) of experiential knowledge (*gnarus* and *gnosis*). A classic structure of narratives mirrors the plot formation of Greek tragedy. For Aristotle, the narrative plot comprises a beginning, middle and end through which successive moments of time are placed in an intelligible story. In Western culture, listeners expect stories to be structured as having a clear beginning, middle, and end. However, post-modern theorists began to recognize a difference between a temporal succession of events and the storyteller’s emplotting of narrative events. As an example, Sandelowski (1991) maintains narratives consist of actions, events, characters, and settings within an ordered plot to ‘make something out of’ those events as guided by socio-cultural conventions and contexts. Story syntax changed from a classic chronological structure of ‘beginning, middle and end’ to post-modern ‘situation, transformation, and new situation’ (Griffiths, 2001). Similarly, McKee (1997) outlines formulaic story design as stable life (peaceful), destabilized life (tension promotes plan of action) and re-stabilized life (resolution). Within a typical story and character arch, a protagonist experiences three levels of conflict moving the story towards change: inner conflict (within self), personal conflict (with others), and extra-personal conflicts (with unknown others/environment) that must be overcome. These points of tension work in tandem with mind, will, emotions, along with

social relationships and circumstances to cause the central character to consider and move towards another pathway or position. McKee's story chart highlights the internal and external conflicts influencing a protagonist's movement from stable to destabilized life, prompting a different course of action:

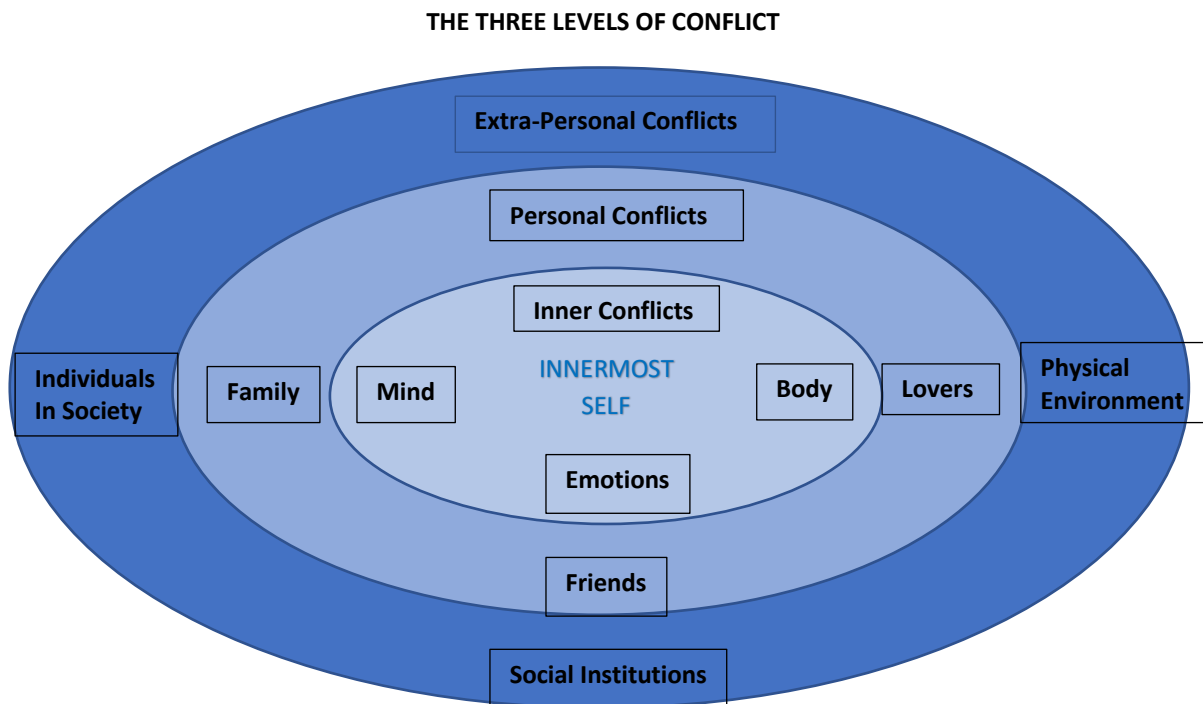


Figure 04. McKee's Three Levels of Conflict

Within his story formulation, Miller (2015) highlights the transformational nature of the story on the central character. He defines narrative as a sense-making device that organizes random events through a set framework. In his view, basic story structure contains a main character, the 'hero' or protagonist who encounters an external conflict (circumstances), an internal problem (struggle, self-doubt), and philosophical tension (such as good versus evil, fairness). The central character meets an authoritative guide who provides a problem-solving 'call to action' which arouses a crisis point and forces the protagonist to make a response. This conflict causes the story to become meaningful by allowing an opportunity for transformation to occur. The story then moves towards climax and resolution, success or failure. If the protagonist faces the challenge and moves towards action, the tensions are resolved, and the hero is transformed. Adversity becomes redemptive as the central character learns through presenting pains and problems.

Conventional story formulations put forth by McKee, Miller, and others agree that conflict and adversity fuel the character arc towards transformation as protagonists change into someone different at the end than they were at the beginning. Likewise, conversion stories anticipate the challenges, changes, and embodiment of transformation as a person moves from one meta-narrative to another. For Miller, conversion is about identity transformation through learning what is beautiful and what is profane. Based upon this broad-brushed introduction, investigation of conversion narratives should consider the converts' 'character arc' towards transformation:⁵⁰

Table 05. Conventional Story Formulation

Initial State	Conflict or Challenge	Move to action	Resolution	Transformation	Guide
Beginning Situation Stability Creation Home	Middle New Situation De-stabilization Fall Away	Crisis Decision Quest	End New Situation Re-stabilization Restoration Home	Biographical Reconstruction	Authority Religious Text Person Group

3.2.2. Narrative Function and Worldview

An individual's story is not meaningful in isolation, but only as located within a larger narrative. Meta-narratives provide the broader context for understanding experiences and events and become the individual stories of those who embrace them. Just as syntactic order is required to make a narrative comprehensible, an overarching theme is considered important to render narrative events meaningful and coherent, and is by nature inescapable.⁵¹ Yamane citing Miller (1990, p. 69) maintains, 'A sequence of experiences can only be a *meaningful* sequence if they are ordered and reordered according to some overarching theme drawn from motive, genres, or myths, toward some end goal, given a purpose in the context of the individual's life'. Overarching meta-narratives answer basic questions regarding the nature

⁵⁰ These descriptive terms were used by referenced authors.

⁵¹ Even the perspective 'There is no meta-narrative' has itself an inescapable meta-narrative view expressing the nature of reality.

of reality and provide structure, meaning, and coherence within community and personal narratives. Worldviews build the storied framework through which experiences, practices, and narratives are understood, lived, and expressed. Per Sire (2004, p. 122):

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be *expressed as a story* or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.

Sire (2004) identified seven basic questions each worldview explains: (1) What is prime reality – the really real? (2) What is the nature of external reality? (3) What is a human being? (4) What happens to a person at death? (5) Why is it possible to know anything at all? (6) How do we know what is right and wrong? and (7) What is the meaning of human history? For Colson (1999) metanarrative stories include beliefs about the origin and nature of the universe and human life, the central problem(s) human beings face, and the solution(s) to those problems as answered through three questions: (1) Where did we come from and who are we (*creation* and *identity*)? (2) What has gone wrong with the world and with us (*fall* and *brokenness*)? and, (3) What can be done to fix the world and us (*redemption*)?

All meta-narratives, both religious and non-religious, define their differing beliefs, tell a story of reality, and commend believers to accept and embody it. Goldberg (2001, p. 156) claims religion requires more than discrete doctrines, principles, and rules. Otherwise, human experience and religious ethics are robbed of their vitality. Narrative structure determines the ‘shape of the story – *how* things are expressed’ and ‘what is represented by the story’ regarding symbolic meaning and truth’. Stories direct our attention to the world and our activities in the world, shapes our understanding of reality and the way we relate to reality. Finally, the ethical nature of stories is revealed through their inherent moral structure, whether secular or religious. Stories not only describe the world but also prescribe how the world ought to be and might be changed in the future. Narratives communicate what we are doing in the world and the world we intend to achieve. For Griffiths (2001, p. 217),

‘Religious communities cannot perform their functions without making some set of descriptive claims about how the world is, and how human persons ought to behave in it.’ Kling (2014, p. 599) declared the reality of ‘enormous diversity in theological content, ritual expression, and behavioral expectations’ among varying faith communities at different times and places. Within the context of this research, the ultimate storied claims of naturalistic Atheism and Christianity will be reviewed in the next chapter.

3.3. Conversion Narrative

Beyond defining stories of reality, meta-narratives also provide connections for the conversion story. For Milton (2013, p. 113) ‘meta-contexts’ are the ‘overarching contexts within which all other contexts are believed to be located and find their meaning’. Religions invite individuals to ‘reinterpret their lives in this new story’s light’ making possible a ‘core shift’ and ‘process of re-identification that runs deeper for them than any other’. DuFault-Hunter (2012, p. 103) agrees, ‘Converts engage in a complex hermeneutical task of linking their individual life to a metanarrative. Their experiences are organized according to an overarching theme...Religion provides a master story that defines the problem or problems of humankind, often in epic, story form, and simultaneously demands that adherents consciously link their own life to this understanding of the world.’ These narrative analysts see the foundational relationship between worldview meta-narratives, conversion, and the stories converts tell.

The structure and function of personal narrative becomes more focused and pronounced within the context of conversion. The structure of conversion narratives is similar to that of general story construction, per Popp-Baier (2002), including temporal perspective (past, present, and future) as well as plot and synthesis components. That is, life circumstances, events, experiences, and agents must be combined into a meaningful temporal synthesis giving rise to a beginning, integration, culmination, and ending. The story implies decisive life change, reconciling conflicting desires with a movement towards self-transformation. Hindmarsh (2014) agrees that a ‘syntax of conversion’ exists and is similar

to the syntax of narrative. Conversion narrative structure is characterized by pre-conversion 'situation' (beginning), conversion 'transformation' (middle), followed by post-conversion 'new situation' (end). When telling conversion stories, converts often speak of their life lived in the past (pre-conversion) and their life lived in the present (post-conversion). Hindmarsh (2014, pp. 344-345) states, 'The experience of religious conversion has led, that is, to creative re-reading of one's own life in these new terms, a second conversion of life into text.' To illustrate conversion's transformative effect, he quotes the conversion narrative of Sampson Staniforth, a 25-year old soldier in the English army in the 18th century (2005, p. 1):

From twelve at night till two it was my turn to stand sentinel at a dangerous post...As soon as I was alone, I kneeled down, and determined not to rise, but to continue crying and wrestling with God, till He had mercy on me. How long I was in that agony I cannot tell. But as I looked up to heaven, I saw the clouds open exceeding bright, and I saw Jesus hanging on the cross. At the same moment these words were applied to my heart, 'Thy sins are forgiven thee.' My chains fell off; my heart was free. All guilt was gone, and my soul was filled with unutterable peace. I loved God and all mankind, and the fear of death and hell was vanished away. I was filled with wonder and astonishment.

Staniforth's religious turning point as the defining moment of his life around which he structured his entire narrative. That is, his conversion story was divided between his pre- and post-conversion life. Per Hindmarsh (2014, p. 345), 'Everything that preceded his conversion was prologue; and, everything that followed was epilogue...His conversion was not on the periphery of his life but rather went to the heart of his identity, defined a new ordering of his life story that made sense of his life...He did not just have a conversion experience; he had a conversion narrative'. He concedes, however, while 'conversion narratives can be formulaic in their adherence to a theology-based structure they are more often creatively interacting with religious codes'. Basic story structure remains, but particularities vary according to the religious community's narrative, including the spiritual role of the divine.

Stromberg (2014, 119-120) affirms that the generic conventions of story apply to conversion narrative, but the story uniquely 'represents intervention of the divinity in the life of a believer who was transformed by that intervention.' Alternatively, Nieuwkerk (2014, pp.

668-669) sees conversion testimonies as a specific genre with narrative structure and particular variations, but she denies a general conversion pattern. In her view, conversions are a 'radical change to something new' created retrospectively with past events reinterpreted in light of evolving convictions and self-perceived positive life change. Due to this ongoing reinterpretation, scholars believe the conversion narrative itself contributes to transformation.

3.3.1. Conversion Narrative as Transformative

Contemporary scholars contend that the very act of conversion story-telling produces changes in the story-teller (Snow and Machalek, 1984, Staples and Mauss, 1987, Goldberg, 2001, C. Smith, 2009, Stromberg, 2014). For Snow and Machalek (1984), the narrative itself organizes the self through his/her new universe of discourse. Personal transformation is realized through 'shattering of the past and reassembling the disjointed pieces with a new grammar for putting things together'. The new discourse pulls together personal memories and experiences into a more coherent pattern, providing a 'master attribution scheme' and promoting adoption of a 'master role' through which new religious convictions form the very core of the convert's identity. Staples and Mauss (1987) assert the convert's 'self-conscious self-transformation of the convert's core self' is accomplished through language. Language is not merely a marker of the convert's status but is the means by which transformation takes place. Christian Smith (2009, p. 64) confirms the generative nature of conversion narrative:

We continue to make stories but are also *made by* them. We tell and retell narratives that themselves come fundamentally to constitute and direct our lives...We fundamentally understand what reality is, who we are, and how we ought to live by locating ourselves within the larger narratives and metanarratives that we hear and tell and constitute what is for us real and significant.'

Nieuwkerk (2014) agrees that conversion testimonies are created retrospectively (post-conversion) with prior events reinterpreted in light of current convictions through the process of telling and retelling conversion stories. Stromberg (2014, pp. 30-31) summarizes, 'Transformation is best understood as accomplished not in the original conversion event but rather in the recounting (and to some extent a re-living) of that event...The conversion

narrative may effect self-transformation by tapping into deep motivations and transforming them into something of religious significance.’⁵²

More specifically, language is generative in imparting meaning through the convert’s ordering of words, use of analogies and metaphors, along with accompanying use of voice and gestures, according to Stromberg (2014, pp. 120, 125-127). The relationship between words and their referring symbols can be more than merely descriptive, but constitutionally creative of the symbolic myth or story. The symbolism can ‘effect a momentary tangency between the transcendent and the mundane’. He termed this creative capacity of language as ‘the meta-pragmatic character of language’ due to the ‘capacity of language to create the situations in which we dwell’. Use of language becomes a powerful linguistic tool of the convert, not only to transform language towards greater meaning, but also for reality and self to be transformed through it.

Personal and conversion narratives, then, are not merely ordered but possess meaning bearing properties in the selected experiences and events and the way they are arranged. For Yamane (2000, p. 183), narratives are ‘a primary linguistic vehicle through which people grasp the meaning of lived experience by configuring and reconfiguring past experiences in ongoing stories which have certain plots or directions, and which guide the interpretation of those experiences.’ Fackre (1996) affirms the variability of a narrator’s story structure based upon their functional desire to achieve greater meaning and coherence, acknowledging both narrative structure (in a broad sense) and function (in the narrow sense): In a broad sense, narrative refers to the account by a narrator of events and participants moving in some pattern over space and time through conflict towards resolution. In a narrow sense, the narrator self-consciously controls the flow of events and characters through the plotline in order to express coherence, meaning, and direction. This differentiation was also made by Goldberg (2001)

⁵² In his language analysis of early Protestant conversions, Stromberg (2014, pp. 119-121) found that conversion testimonies provide meaning and direction for the convert. He states, ‘Reworking the flow of experience into a series of discrete episodes progressing toward an ending that makes sense of the whole is a powerful way of bringing meaning and coherence to the course of a life.’

who maintains that narrators self-reflect beyond the events themselves ('simplex') towards considering their meaning ('duplex'). In his view, before conversion, a person's life story is challenged and judged from the perspective of another story. If converts embrace the new story, they experience transformed meaning and commitments as they find themselves living the new story. Questions of identity, purpose, and meaning are answered, and relationships are reconciled within a new understanding of past, present, and future. Goldberg (2001, p. 115) summarizes, 'The ultimate prescriptive claim that a religious tradition makes via the story it relates is that the one who hears it ought to 'become that story' and thus so embody that story in his own life, that through his life, he will on to relate it to others'. In his view, autobiographical stories are dynamic and evolving, shaped by the development of self over time towards new self-imaging with novel re-collection and representation. Order, content, emphasis, and images depend upon the storyteller's perspective on their past, from their present standpoint, and their intentional ends.

For Elliott (2005) narratives are organized in such a way to bring significance to events in order to bring meaning for themselves and for their specific audience. In narrative research, this epi-narrative awareness becomes an important part of communication between speaker and listener if the story is to be mined and understood. The listener adds a separate yet influential component in understanding the narrator's story. Hindmarsh (2014, p. 349) reminds that meaningful communication of the story is more than its individual telling. The narrator speaks into a presumed context of listener understanding and anticipation of narrative progression. He states, 'the story creates syntax by linking memory and expectation and the sense of an ending that is more than chronological...The listener is lifted from the temporal plane of annalistic report to the narrative plane of unfolding progression where one event leads to another.' As a result, the acts of story-telling and 'story-listening' contribute to narrative structure, development and interpretation. As the listener becomes aware of the story's narrative features, she/he gains insight towards the narrator's meaning-making and

transformation.⁵³

Yet the listener must also be aware of the ethical nature of personal story telling (Yamane, 2000, Goldberg, 2001, Gergen, 2002). For Hindmarsh (2014, pp. 351-352), certain moral ends of storytelling are in view as an ‘act of persuasion to influence the listener towards certain ethical ends regarding the nature of the good implied in the story and the way it is told.’ Within the ‘communication triangle’ of the narrator, the story, and the listener, a presumed compact of fidelity exists that the ‘story will fit with empirical facts’ with ‘an adequate representation [of the story] to the actuality of events’ even if the events of internal mental events or a different perspective with varying details. The ‘ethics of the telling’ is particularly true for the religious conversion narrative. Goldberg (2001, pp. 63-64) asserts, ‘We tell our life stories to those whom we trust’ with an implicit claim that the story is true to life. Self-disclosure - through the selection, deletion, and inclusion of content - reveals a sense of self-acceptance or deception in someone’s ability to face or not face the realities of their own life. What is hidden and revealed exposes not only the character of the storyteller but also provides meaning, shapes the story and the self. It ‘gives assurance of a continued self over time, says something about the meaning of his/her life and about the way he/she intends life to be and to be understood.’ Regardless, deceptive autobiographical telling remains a possibility. A deceptive autobiography may be adopted to protect a person’s way of conceiving and maintaining integrity of the self in light of their circumstances.

While some scholars emphasize the role of language as generative towards transformation, others balance it with the change occurring from the conversion experience itself. Yamane (2000) recognizes researchers have sought to distance conversion language from the experience itself. Instead, he seeks to merge both conversion experience and

⁵³ For example, a convert’s chronological structure may vary as they recount life experiences and influences towards or away from conversion. Interviewers must consider a variable unfolding of information in the determining of how and why the story progresses from situation to transformation to new situation. Chronological telling of events can be interrupted by a voiced memory or other information of which the convert thought was pertinent to their story. Throughout life change, several transformative thoughts and situations may occur before or following the conversion itself, and the listener benefits from staying attuned to signs and signals of the narrator, seeking clarification as needed, appreciating nuances of the story as given.

language towards meaning-making for the convert and for linking the individual to the religious group. As a researcher, my views align more closely with this balanced perspective. While appreciating the generative capacity of language towards transformation along with the presumed ethical nature of discourse as representing actual events, pure linguistic constructionism does not seem sufficient to produce the prior event to which it refers as well as creates. This form of reductionism does not consider those converts who express genuine belief in causal entities beyond immanent social, cultural, and linguistic factors.

3.3.1.1. Biographical Reconstruction

Biographical reconstruction is an ongoing process as converts continuously shape their life stories towards their new larger overarching narrative. The convert's individual story finds a place within a new meta-narrative. A new 'root reality' is embraced and embodied as new beliefs are intellectually established and experientially, spiritually affirmed. New converts 'find themselves' within the new, larger story, and conversion is expressed through new rhetoric, roles, and relationships (as afore-reported in the literature) as reflection of an underlying spiritual change. Ongoing transformation occurs spiritually (new identity, perspectives, priorities, relationships, attitudes and actions – a transformed heart, and life) and intellectually (new cognitive framework for comprehending and substantively expressing new beliefs – a transformed mind). Consequences of conversion range for each convert as affected by the manner and degree to which they embrace their new religious identity.

Gooren (2010, 92-93) considers biographical reconstruction as 'the most important indicator of conversion', when 'people who undergo a conversion experience literally reconstruct their lives, giving new meanings to old events and putting different emphases in the bigger 'plot' of their life stories'. In Goldberg's view (2001), the convert reformulates his own life story in the light of the meaning scheme of the larger story, resulting in transformation of the self. He or she 'becomes' the new story in order to relate it to others, and through embodiment, certain meaning schemes break through to a person, perpetuating self-development and of a new perspective through time. Similarly, Gillespie (1991, p. 247)

appreciates the transformational nature of conversion experience causing a complete re-orientation to life, stating, ‘When one comes close to ultimate reality, one senses that things can never be the same again. The world must now be seen in relationship to that reality, and all of life’s choices and understandings must now be focuses through that prism. Considering God’s will becomes a way of relating to life.’

Recent research studies demonstrate biographical reconstruction in the lives of religious converts. Dufault-Hunter’s (2012) narrative analysis of conversion stories demonstrated transformation of all aspects of the converts’ lives as they learned to re-identify and understand their new roles through their newly adopted narrative. For her, conversion involves ‘re-meaning’ as well as a ‘rewriting’ of life particularly within an all-encompassing, demanding and holistic religion. Converts’ new stories ‘gave form to a living embodiment of their new beliefs, enacted through new habits and practices of devotion and gradually alter their character. They became open to new experiences, different interpretations, feelings, and meanings as encountered individually and shared within a faith community’. Through her analysis, she found that religion provided a master story defining the problems of humanity, but also linked converts to their understanding of the world. Not only does the master story provide spiritual salvation, but it invites individuals to reinterpret their lives and self-identity, make sense of their life (past and present), and give them a hopeful future. She also found religious belief requires an inseparable alteration in lifestyle, that participation in community reinforces alternative identities, importance, and purpose. For her, a demanding form of embodied religion encourages embrace of physical, mental, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and economic ways of living. It fosters a comprehensive form of personal transformation, supported by surrounding community and grounded in the master narrative. In her words (2012, p. 174), ‘thick faith facilitated transformation’.⁵⁴

Similarly, Stout (2012b) conducted a narrative study of eleven ‘born again

⁵⁴ DUFAULT-HUNTER, E. E. 2012. *The Transformative Power of Faith: A Narrative Approach to Conversion*, Lanham, Maryland, Lexington Books. She interviewed 19 people, 14 of whom had undergone significant religious conversions to Islam.

Christians'. She found that converts adapted to 'the broader picture' manifested by a change towards focus on God rather than on self, subsequently leading to greater sense of meaning and purpose in life. Conversion brought about experiences with the Holy Spirit and active decisions to live for God through a gradual, developing journey towards commitment. External (life events) and internal factors (internal disharmony) impacted movement towards conversion in helping the converts make sense of their circumstances and personal dissonance. God became the locus of control over the converts' lives, with a 'letting go' and loss of autonomy to varying degrees. There was a sense of 'dying to self' with lessened self-preoccupation, self-absorption and greater focus on God. Conversion also brought about a sense of acceptance and self-forgiveness. The interviews revealed major changes in converts' attitudes, values, goals, overall purpose, self-definition and ultimate concerns.

In his study of Christian conversion, Iyadurai (2014) emphasized the transformational nature of religious conversion as 'sparked' by the divine-human encounter. He describes transformational effects in converts' spiritual, psychological, behavioral, physical, social, and economical dimensions of life. Spiritually, converts begin to see God as a close companion and intimate friend rather than a distant factor. They have a new understanding of sin, need for confession, and sense of forgiveness. Converts look at life from an eternal perspective, have hope for the future as well as confidence and courage to face any crisis or evil in life. They sense constant divine presence and power in their lives, and their lives become God-centered, prayerful, and ministry-oriented, compelled to share the truth and experience of God with others. Further, converts continue to have religious experiences which enrich their relationship with God and encourage their faith. Intellectually and emotionally, all preconceived ideas and negative attitudes towards God and religion vanish. They present their religious experience and transformed life as proof that 'Jesus is real'.

Iyadurai reported psychological and behavioral effects of conversion as permanence of joy, peace, and happiness, a sense of reassurance due to the constancy of divine presence, and a positive self-image. Converts feel relieved or freed from the heavy burdens of guilt and

sin. They have a sense of hope for the future and self-confidence by the assurance of divine fellowship, that Jesus is with them and is actively intervening in their lives, giving them strength, comfort, and freedom from fear. Converts also find prayer and reading the bible as resources to solve life crises. They sense a new true identity, not as grounded in the world, but in light of their new relationship with Jesus. Converts gain self-control and the ability to regulate their emotions and behaviors, assessing themselves in light of Christian values and the Bible. They become transformed in character to become more like Christ, with new identity, thoughts, attitudes, interests, worldview, wisdom, talents, and actions, drawing great satisfaction in helping others. Life ambitions and career plans change from self-promotion and worldly success to God-driven purposes. Converts are freed from addictive habits and seek to do what pleases Jesus. Physical effects of converts, according to Iyadurai, include episodes of physical healing. Social effects of conversion include being able to love and forgive others, releasing bitterness, resentment, and anger. Economic effects include a sense of God's abundant blessing and care (even in poverty) as well as a personal change of attitude towards money, losing its allure in their lives.

These three studies confirm the depth of transformation observed in converts' lives within a 'thick' view of conversion. Conversion within this context produces, demands, and reveals comprehensive perspective and life change. Within academic literature, other scholars address biographical reconstruction in the areas of sense-making, identity formation, social roles, rituals, and belonging as well as language, rhetoric and symbol.

3.3.1.2. Sense-making

Making sense of life experience and finding meaningful answers to practical problems can lead towards religious conversion. As sense-making agents (Greil, 1977), humans search to understand their lives in the world. When individuals encounter intellectual or emotional conflict, they can be motivated towards seeking resolution through embracing a new religious narrative (Weick, 2005, Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011). When the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world, or when there is no obvious

way to engage the world, the new narrative works to dissolve pre-conversion dissonance in providing a way that makes more sense to the convert in understanding self, others and the world. Worldview narratives provide an orderly, coherent framework. For religious converts, an alternative narrative provides a better explanation for (intellectually) making sense of reality and (experientially, emotionally, and existentially) making sense of themselves. This research raises questions regarding congruity and sense-making between worldviews especially within the context of this thesis in exploring Atheist conversion to Christianity – distinctly different presuppositions regarding reality. The role of problem-solving tendencies will be explored, particularly in view of Atheist seeking answers outside of the naturalistic worldview, and whether crisis, emotional or cognitive dissonance plays a role in initiating a quest towards intellectual sense-making and conversion.

3.3.1.3. Identity formation

The question of identity can prompt a person towards seeking answers through religion and religious conversion. Weick (2005) maintains that the question ‘Who am I?’ arises when people face an unsettling difference and are looking for a story into which that issue can be meaningfully resolved. Researchers confirm the fundamental change in self-identities associated with conversion (Gillespie, 1991, Weick, 2005, Zock, 2006, Stromberg, 2014, Nieuwkerk, 2014). Conversion produces ‘profound transformational change in the whole personality and orientation of an individual, a change which leads the person to a fundamentally new identity as a human being’ (Gillespie, 1991, p. 64). Conversion also affects the ways converts express who they are and how they adapt to situations and purposes in life. This change occurs in light of the converts’ new liberating redemptive story (Dufault-Hunter, 2012, pp. 87-88):

A previous self can be dramatically different (particularly in terms of behaviors and habits) from the current self yet linked by a redemptive story...Within the cohesiveness of a religious metanarrative, one can freely accept responsibility for one’s past without being condemned by it as if it were ‘core’ to one’s self and converts’ identities shift as they rewrite their lives.

Within a constructivist perspective (Brown, 2008, pp. 1036-1037), narratives as ‘discursive resources’ are important for identity formulation, repair, strengthening and revision as self-narratives are ‘worked on by situated actors [to] provide a continuing sense of coherence and distinctiveness’. When considering convert identity, J.M. Smith (2013, p. 460) reminds scholars that they are giving an account of another’s own interpretation of their identity irrespective of the objective accuracy of the representations. In other words, the emic view of self-identity should be respected as given, although the ethical nature of narrative should be kept in view.

3.3.1.4. Social Belonging

Social belonging has long been considered an integral part of religious conversion, according to researchers. Within the context of narrative analysis, personal conversion stories provide a sense of social awareness, experience, and belonging to larger community narratives. Conversion is unique to the individual but also connects to personal, biblical, and community contexts which all uniquely shape conversion, community identity as well as identification with a community (Milton, 2013, Kling, 2014, Stromberg, 2014). Cunliffe and Coupland (2011, p. 66) agree, ‘Collective narratives help individuals to interpret their actions in light of their obligations and to understand how they should or should not act in particular social contexts...[they] socially connect us with our social surroundings through an ongoing process of interpreting, assessing, and critiquing our experience’. For Griffiths (2001, p. 228), the larger context of Christian narrative is indispensable to Christian theology and conversion, not only to ‘exhibit the community’s descriptive and axiological claims [but also] to transform the perpetual, affect, moral, and cognitive habits of its members’. This social connection becomes important in considering social belonging and transformational influence through the conversion process, particularly moving from Atheist to Christian communities. With biographical reconstruction in view, narrative analysis of changes in converts’ context and community both pre- and post-conversion merits attention.

3.3.1.5. Language, Rhetoric, and Symbol

The words and language converts use to tell conversion stories also become an important aspect of narrative analysis. Language itself is an abstract symbol representing a corresponding concept or object. Beyond basic linguistic representation, however, is a meta-linguistic, symbolic relationship of word and referent through which meaning is given, particularly within religious and conversion narratives. Goldberg (2001) contends religious narratives provide a vision of the self as those within the religious community seek to become the embodiment of images presented to them. Gillespie (1991, p. 247) recognizes the importance of symbolism in fostering identity, belonging, the transcendent nature of reality, and conversion:

As a means of cementing a feeling of community with the life of the church, religious workers, pastors, and youth ministers can use *symbols of religious faith that invoke identification with God*. Although this is a rather subjective use of symbols, still, religious people need to constantly be acquainted with those *rich representations of ultimate reality* which have an evocative aspect to them...

Through such symbols one identifies with God (one who is both caring and personal). Participations in *the symbolic representations of God* move one beyond simple statements to affirming an experienced reality. Involvement in *symbolic understandings* helps us declare something intensely personal. Those people identify with God as their own God. And that God is one who recognizes them as in need of forgiveness and acceptance.

As an example, the Christian narrative finds symbolic, historic, and spiritual meaning within the overarching theme of the Judeo-Christian story. Biblical stories reveal God's action in time and others' action in time (such as in the lives of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and the apostles). Moreover, those stories and images relate to those who hear or read them. The religious narrative becomes the context through which a person sees his/her own life, makes commitments, and become part of the larger story, causing a shift in beliefs towards *lived* theology. Sachs Norris (2003) believes new converts first view symbolism and language of their new (alien) religious culture through the filter of their original language and worldview, then develop their understanding gradually as they adapt to the new belief system. Fackre (1996, pp. 29-30, 32) appreciates the collegiality and mutual enrichment of the [biblical] text,

the drama of life experience, and the lore of the Christian community along with their corresponding symbols and themes. He sees conversion narrative as communication of religious truth and norms through human experience and expression. For him, the ‘very act of verbal storytelling is the way to faith, hope, and love as God wills and works disclosure and transformation’. Goldberg (2001) tells a conversion narrative demonstrating the symbolic use of language through the story of a 46-year-old Baptist pastor:

So, I joined that particular church after about a month of visiting there. But I was first saved and then I followed Christ to baptism, which I hadn’t been baptized before...And then after this my life began to grow and materialize into something that was real, something that I could really identify with. The emptiness that was there before was now being replaced by something that had meaning and purpose in it. And I began to sense the need of telling others about what had happened to me.

And basically, I think perhaps the *change could be detected in my life*, as the Bible declares, that *when a person is saved, the old man, the old person, or the character that they were passes away, and then they become a new creation in Christ Jesus*. That is to say, there might be a character that may be drinking and cutting up and carrying on and a variety of other things that are ill toward God. All of these things began to dissolve away. I found that I had no desire for these things, but I began to abhor them. I actually began to hate them. And this was in accordance with the Scriptures as I found out later.

Goldberg identifies the highly symbolic use of language in this testimony, particularly in movement from his ‘old’ life to his ‘new’ life, his growing loss of desire for destructive behaviors with his new identity in Jesus Christ and new desires towards pleasing God. His language mirrored the conversion model narrated in scripture of the ‘old man’ becoming a ‘new creation in Christ Jesus’. Gooren (2010, p. 96) considered Pentecostal Christian images and language of conversion narratives, particularly how the images and language used has changed in the last two centuries. As compared to the agony and motivating fear of hell found within Puritan conversion stories, more contemporary Christian conversion stories speak of ‘surrendering’, ‘yielding’, or ‘giving themselves or their lives to Christ’ in response to an invitation to salvation and a personal relationship with Him. Pentecostal conversion rituals also provide images symbolic of life-change, including baptism by full immersion, according to Gooren. This form of baptism symbolizes ‘the overwhelming experience of

receiving the Holy Spirit for the first time'.⁵⁵ In other traditional forms of Christianity, baptism by full immersion symbolizes death to the old life and being raised from death to newness of life based upon scripture. Hoskins (2016) analyzed conversion narratives of thirty-six Muslim converts to Christianity. Three languages of conversion were observed: the 'language of joining' religious community, the 'language of rejecting' their former religion, and the 'language of believing' in newfound faith in Jesus through several 'spiritual turns'.

Language, rhetoric, and symbols expressed in conversion stories are important in narrative analysis of conversion stories. This symbolic understanding of language has potential, not only for the convert in expressing and being transformed by his conversion experience, but also for the researcher in understanding the story and the convert in a more comprehensive way. As this research investigates religious conversion of those who are transformed from those who believe in immanent realities alone (within the naturalistic Atheist story) to those who come to believe in both immanent and transcendent realities (within the Christian story), it is important to understand the symbols and language of each.

3.4. The Narrative Approach in Conversion Research

3.4.1. An Integrative Narrative Approach

The narrative researcher's goal is understanding both the story and the story-teller. According to Hindmarsh (2014, p. 361), it is 'not merely to draw upon narrative and autobiographical theories to interpret their subjects, but also to demonstrate the explanatory potential of religious conversion and belief for our understanding of the human person as inveterate storyteller and self-biographer'. Historically, conversion researchers have analyzed narratives according to varying theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. Stromberg (2014, pp. 119-120) recognizes a consensus in the *conception* of conversion narrative, that 'it seems

⁵⁵GOOREN, H. 2010. Conversion Narratives. In: A. ANDERSON, M. B., A. DROOGERS, C. VAN DER LAAN (ed.) *In Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Gooren also describes 'Starting with Pentecostalism at the beginning of the twentieth century, Brereton notes a general change in the language of the convert. People start talking about having a personal relationship with Christ or about Christ as their personal Savior. They would even say, 'Jesus died for me, personally'; others referred to their 'personal knowledge of Jesus Christ' or to knowing him 'personally.' In the twentieth century, Christ the Savior gradually became a 'friend' or a 'companion': 'He is addressed more colloquially and informally than in the past. Narrators often speak to and about him simply as 'Jesus'.

to be a coherent process that occurs in similar ways in the lives of different people’.

However, he sees divergence in the attributed *cause* of the conversion process. Reasons for conversion changed from its first (more theological) understanding as ‘intervention of the divinity into the life of a believer who was transformed by that intervention’ to its current (more social scientific) understanding to be psychologically and/or ‘culturally generated conventions’. In pursuit of a more holistic method, Stromberg advocates joining the two approaches. While he appreciates how cultural understanding and language shapes both conversion narrative and experience, he also appreciates religious conversion language (as a symbolic system, a universe of discourse) as both referential and constitutive. Religious meanings connect with language and experiences, both leading to self-transformation.

Sremac (2010, pp. 20-21) also acknowledges the shift in conversion research and considers current scholarship as reductionistic in its approach. Although most scholars consider religious conversion to be a radical change in self-perspective, conversion stories are often analyzed only at the superficial discourse level. Rather than conversion stories seen as deeply integrated life narratives, they have become viewed merely as ‘speech acts to be analyzed’, focusing on structural, rhetorical features, connection with socio-cultural contexts and religious tradition. While he agrees that self-transformation is possible through new language discourse and the act of the narrative itself, he disagrees with its limitations which ‘leave no room for the spiritual dimension in a conversion process’. For Sremac (p. 26), ‘bracketing divine agency in a conversion phenomenon is unacceptable’, stating, ‘Language has an important role in the self-transformation process, but it is not the only source of transformation in a convert’s life’.⁵⁶ His goal in narrative analysis is to combine practical theology and social constructionist perspectives in conversion research. He contends it is

⁵⁶ SREMAC, S. 2010. Converting into a New Reality: Social Constructionism, Practical Theology and Conversion. *Nova prisutnost*, 8, 7-27., pp. 24-25. Sremac reiterates the need for a spiritual source as causal towards transformation stating, ‘I must also deny that conversion is only a social construction. Conversion experience transcends social construction and social construction cannot grasp conversion experience without a theological dialogue in the first place’, p. 26.

possible to be a realist, acknowledging the reality of God in conversion,⁵⁷ yet also a constructivist, acknowledging social, contextual, and linguistic components of the conversion narrative, enabling a ‘more complete interpretation’ of the conversion process. Sremac (2010, p. 13) affirms,

It is possible indeed, as far as one affirms that God is an active agent in the conversion process. Using a social construction framework, we do not need to reject the claim that God works in conversion nor do we have to question it...

The interaction between the social sciences and theological empirical research creates a place for a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of conversion in which all researchers are invited and engaged in new contributions.

Dufault-Hunter (2012, pp. 56-57) maintains a holistic narrative approach captures individual components ‘without losing sight of the whole’ and is superior to other conventional methods of analysis. It incorporates yet reaches beyond social constructionism allowing for theological and transcendent influences to be part of the whole picture in narrative analysis. She states (2012, p. 87), ‘Only through a holistic approach to conversion that attends to its narrative nature can we begin to truly understand it [as] narrative reframes religious conversion so that no one aspect can be comprehended apart from the others’. For her, hermeneutics is key in avoiding not only the reduction of religious experience to a single fundamental social, emotional or psychological influence but also an extreme relativism discounting the accessibility of a person’s unique experience. Rather, ‘comprehensive narrative analysis considers how emotional, social, psychological, and spiritual aspects of the human person interact with one another and understands personal changes taking place within the larger religious story.’ She states (2012, p. 89),

The power of strong religion to transform people flows from its narrative character, and this narrative character demands an approach that acknowledges faith’s link to all aspects of the human person (emotional,

⁵⁷ Sremac argues: we can distinguish between that which we refer to when speaking and the statements we construct about that to which we refer, distinguishing between *ontological objective* and *epistemological subjective*. Therefore, the whole of social reality cannot be reduced only to language. Language cannot be the total explanation of social reality. *Constructionist views are not necessarily anti-realist and they do not necessarily lead to relativism.*

Per Ganzevoort (see: Bidwell, 2004, pp. 13-14) *Social constructionism does not deny the reality of phenomena but shifts attention from ontological to conversational interpretation.* Social constructionism is an epistemological not ontological theory. It does not make claims about the nature of private experience of physical reality but about the process of expressing and making sense of private experience within physical reality.

psychological, intellectual, social, cultural, and practical). Thick religion consists in these aspects, inseparable and irreducible to any of them.'

In Dufault-Hunter's view, researchers should understand religious change through a lens in which each part of a person and his or her story are held in tension to other aspects. In sum, she promotes a multi-disciplinary narrative analysis paradigm as the way to demonstrate a comprehensive view of conversion, allowing integration of practical theological and social science concepts. This non-reductive narrative approach considers both emic and etic views, providing allowance for incorporation of both convert and researcher perspectives, including recognition of potential divine influences. For Dufault-Hunter, if we are to achieve understanding, we must imagine ourselves into their world. In analyzing the narrative of a Muslim convert, she accepts a convert's story (Veronique) of an angelic visitation as an indication of her post-conversion transformed perspective in the context of a new 'master story'. She advises researchers to accept the fullness of emic perspective as part of their story, not to be dismissed *a priori*. Dufault-Hunter (2012, p. 119) states,

Presumably, those with alternative worldviews would interpret this visitation differently, including those whose secular or 'scientific' paradigm precludes that this event actually occurred. By allowing Veronique to tell her own story and by listening to her interpretation of it, a hermeneutic of conversion allows for the mysterious element of the 'spiritual'; extraordinary aspects of human religious experience are not reduced or shifted in order to fit into another (social scientist's) grand narrative. They sit, however uneasily, *sui generis* – as something to be respected in themselves.

In saying this, social scientists are not precluded from commenting or guessing about these events. In a hermeneutic of conversion, however, they must refrain from reducing the event to that which makes sense to them...These extraordinary events and the converts' integration of them into their religious story should be given voice, even as a social scientist might also provide additional or alternative interpretations.

The key here for social scientists is their willingness to treat and report these events with humility, acknowledging that humans are complex and irreducible creatures who, perhaps, occasionally touch a realm largely unknown to them.

For Dufault-Hunter, there are several advantages of using a holistic narrative approach (NA) in religious conversion research:

- NA incorporates insights of a variety of disciplines (sociology, psychology, ethics, and theology) in order to understand conversion generally as well as how personal transformation occurs through strong faith.
- NA's rich understanding of story allows researchers in religion to attend to multiple levels of human experience simultaneously, viewing the convert in multiple dimensions and situated in a complex web of understanding.
- NA provides an integrative concept for understanding conversion and strict religious faith
- NA appreciates insights of the social sciences in explaining why demanding faith substantively alters individuals; but, insists that these alone cannot account for the ways religious convictions spread throughout the convert and revolutionize the person's attitudes and actions. For some, the *metanoia* or good, hard turn in their lives took can only be understood within the context of relationship to the Divine.
- Within NA, conversion can be understood as the embodiment of an alternative mythos and insists that all characters in the tale be taken seriously, even Divine ones – regardless of whether one personally believes such a character exists or acts in the fashion described by the convert.
- NA provides an epistemological presumption incorporating the multiple aspects of human encounter into our reading of the zealous other while incorporating the insights of theorists.

The balanced perspectives of Stromberg, Sremac, and Dufault-Hunter provide a way forward for those researchers who seek to understand the comprehensive nature of religious conversion. Combining theological and social science approaches allows the complete emic perspective to be 'heard' and seriously considered and makes room to include all influences, including intellectual and spiritual substance, in the creation of a transformed life.

3.4.2. Narrative Approach Models in Conversion Research

3.4.2.1. Zock's Biographical-Narrative Model (2006)

Religious conversion theories and models guide conversion research. Zock (2006) claims models provide culturally acceptable forms of expressing conversion experiences and inform conversion research concepts, theories, and scientific paradigms. She advocates a 'Biographical-Narrative' model inclusive of psychosocial, social-scientific, literary and textual aspects of religious conversion. For Zock, a crucial question in narrative-focused biographical research concerns the relation between the 'narrated life' (discourse analysis of conversion stories) and 'lived life' (psycho-social functions served by conversion story). The researcher's aim is to examine how individuals use conversion stories in order to create meaning and identity through biographical construction. In her paradigm (Zock 2006, pp. 54-

55), the convert's new identity is socially constructed as life-events are spoken, interpreted, and given meaning:

By hearing and reading conversion stories, a potential convert becomes acquainted with a religious group, its beliefs and behavior.

By telling conversion stories, people appropriate a conversion model and use it as a means of biographically reconstructing life-events.

As compared to solely passive or active paradigms, her Biographical-narrative model demonstrates a dynamic, comprehensive view of conversion including rational, social-cultural, and emotional aspects, although it does not include consideration of the 'divine':

Table 06. Zock's Biographical-Narrative Model

Passive paradigm	Active Paradigm	Biographical-narrative paradigm
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passive, deterministic • Individual • Emotional • Static • Radical, once-for-all • Belief precedes behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active, volitional • Social • Rational • Dynamic • Conversion career • Behavior precedes belief 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active, volitional • Socio-cultural • Emotional and rational • Dynamic • A lifelong process • Interaction between belief and behavior

Within this paradigm, the convert is an active individual seeking transformation of life and self through conversion stories. Rather than a linear process of events, Zock perceives a more dynamic interaction between beliefs and behaviors as the convert engages within personal relationships, religious traditions, and socio-cultural contexts.

3.4.2.2. Gooren's Conversion Career Model (2010)

By contrast, Gooren (2010) uses a historical and phenomenological approach⁵⁸ to the conversion narrative, analyzing it as a social construction and not necessarily as a factual description of the main events in an individual's life. In his view, research models of conversion should define a limited set of parameters which can be empirically observed and

⁵⁸On Phenomenological Approach: KIM, J.-H. 2016. *Understanding Narrative Inquiry*, Los Angeles, CA, Sage Publications. Kim describes phenomenology as attempting to provide 'a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide....In phenomenology, knowledge begins with subjectivity, and this subjectivity is the epistemological starting point...Phenomenological reduction refers to a way of acquiring knowledge based in non-judgmental, outer-awareness of the world...withhold[ing] any claim, commitment, or prior knowledge regarding its real existence or nature. When we engage in phenomenological reduction, we say how a phenomenon looks to us rather than claiming what a phenomenon is.' The investigator 'brackets' assumptions regarding judgments or experiences as true.

investigated through specific indicators. These conversion indicators include convert speech and reasoning, biographical reconstruction, and new universe of discourse. Indicators of ongoing church commitment include adoption of new master attribution scheme, suspension of reasoning by analogy, and embracement of convert role; and, an indicator of confession is a new social identity. Through use of his Conversion Career model, Gooren (2005) analyzes conversion narratives with a five-level typology of religious activity (e.g., pre-affiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession, disaffiliation). These levels are viewed as dynamic and not necessarily chronological. An example from Pentecostal conversion shows application of this model (Gooren 2010a, pp. 105-106): 1) Pre-affiliation stage is typically marked with crisis and repentance, an awareness of something wrong, as well as Jesus' care for them; 2) Affiliation is identified by the pre-convert's socialization into Pentecostalism accompanied by felt need to personally accept Jesus as Savior and publicly profess their commitment through baptism; 3) Conversion Stage involves change of identity and worldview as expressed through biographical reconstruction and transformation of desires and behaviors through receiving of the Holy Spirit; and 4) Confession is revealed through heightened levels of commitment, life change, orientation, purpose, and expression. Here, Gooren demonstrates the convert linking their conversion story to the larger Christian narrative of fall (self-identified awareness of something wrong with need for repentance), redemption (awareness of Jesus' love and their personal acceptance, profession of, and baptismal identification with Jesus as savior), and restoration (identified through changed identity, actions, and purposes, receiving of the Holy Spirit, and increasing commitment). Within his Conversion Career model, each conversion is potentially one of many over a life-time of change. Through the phenomenological approach, Gooren grants room to fully receive the emic perspective as the convert provides it through narrative, language and action.

3.4.2.3. Dufault-Hunter's Narrative Lens for Reading Conversion (2012)

Dufault-Hunter's (2012) model understands conversion narrative as multi-dimensional, integrated and dynamic. In her view, conversion narrative is temporally enacted (socio-economically), interpreted (intellectually), embodied (psycho-emotionally), encountered (spiritually, psychologically), remembered (communally), and improvised-in-context (socio-historically). Her Narrative Lens for Reading Conversion follows:

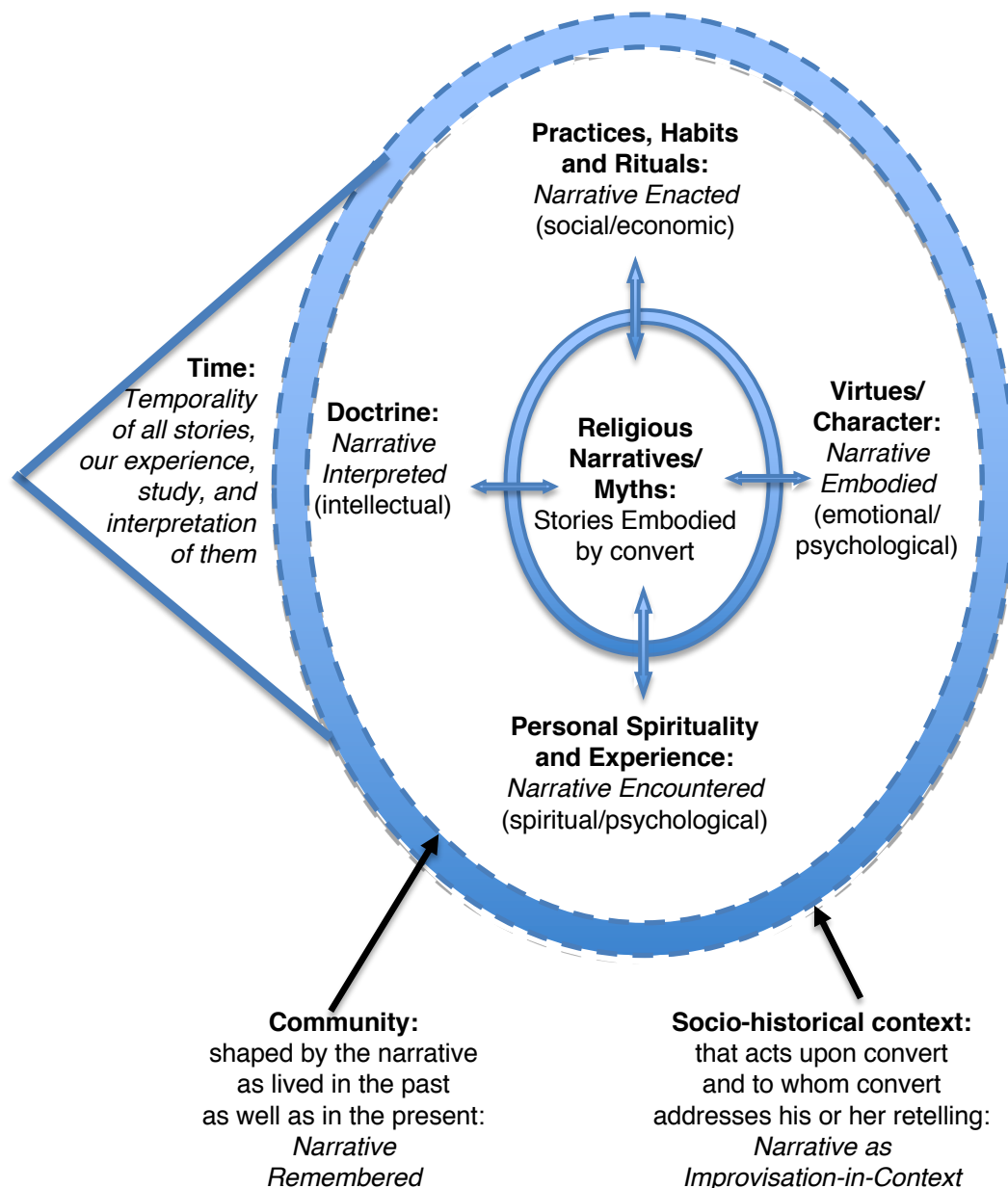


Figure 05. Dufault-Hunter's Narrative Lens for Reading Conversion

Her paradigm demonstrates capacity for change over time in different areas as the convert embraces and embodies a religious narrative, appreciating internal and external influences. For Dufault-Hunter (2012, pp. 130-131), this ‘thick’ narrative lens ‘provides us with a greater depth of field, so that we can see the levels at which religion works in the convert...it underscores the ability of religion to transform persons’. Although she clearly appreciates the role of biographical reconstruction in the life of the convert from her narrative analysis work, this model (although allowing for change) does not clearly show transformation from old to new identity, but only demonstrates fluidity and capacity for movement. Although specific areas of transformation appear influenced by the larger religious meta-narrative, there is no indication that these isolated components inter-relate. Further, sense-making is limited to intellectual interpretation - discounting emotional/existential sense-making. While she appreciates biographical reconstruction over time in the experience, study, and interpretation of the narrative, the model does not seem to indicate how temporality affects not only the telling and retelling of the conversion story.

3.4.2.4. Proposed Religious Conversion Narrative Analysis Approach (2019)

Based upon literature review, I developed a narrative analysis approach for religious conversion. Process maps are created through the determination of starting and termination points, listing different events in the process, the sequence and direction of events and logical relationships among the events. As a ‘core facet of a conceptual system [is] to provide insights into a phenomenon,’ this model provides a theoretical, visual map serving to explain religious conversion. The paradigm was structured towards ‘providing the best explanation of available evidence, that accounts for all the facts, that explains your data, and is plausible and/or simple enough to be accepted’ (Bazeley, 2013, p. 339; see also Jaccard, 2010, p. 279). The mixed-method nature of this research provides greater confidence in not only establishing concepts and categorical relationships, but also temporality of a linear yet flexible process. The linear process permits flexibility between stages, allowing for unique individual journeying. It grants laterality for stages to occur sequentially with allowance for

reflexivity, or simultaneously (i.e., convincing spiritual encounter may concurrently precipitate Confirmation and Conversion). Further, this conceptual map provides predictive modeling and/or anticipated stages of movement towards religious conversion from an alternative perspective.

This approach acknowledges embodied personal narrative as located within larger pre- and post-meta-narratives, informed and reinforced by context and community narratives, and expressed through language and symbol. It represents one cycle of conversion within a lifetime of potentially multiple conversions, portraying potential stages of movement from embodied 'old' Pre-conversion Meta-narrative towards Catalyst, Conversion, and embodiment of 'new' Post-Conversion Meta-narrative. Pre-conversion, the convert may be open or closed towards change, but becomes open through natural and/or supernatural catalysts (crisis or non-crisis) prompting action towards reconsideration, questing, and conversion. This process may occur in short or prolonged time periods during which the potential convert can stall, reverse, or progress towards adopting another religious perspective. Through religious conversion, the canonical text and religious community reinforce the reality of the convert's new spirituality, experience, belonging, identity, purpose, meaning, and sense-making. Transformation of these parameters occur prior to, during, and following conversion, verbally expressed through language as well as embodied living.⁵⁹ Ongoing transformation is accomplished through active engagement in and commitment to a new understanding of and relationship with God, self, and others. The convert begins to 'see', describe, and purpose him/herself within a new meta-narrative, while keeping the past, present, and future in view. Further, this schema acknowledges temporality and ongoing biographical reconstruction throughout the process from pre-conversion through

⁵⁹ Within this paradigm, language is viewed as both referential and constitutive in personal narrative. That is, the narrative refers to actual events, experiences, thoughts, and emotions which prompted consideration and/or movement towards and beyond conversion experience. The telling and re-tellings of the conversion narrative also reinforce the reality of the conversion experience, ground the convert's belonging, personal identity, purposes, and sense-making both within the context of the canonical text as well as with their new community, and is constitutive in this sense.

post-conversion as the narrator conceives, interprets, develops, and tells his/her story over time and as the listener interprets the convert's story over time and context.

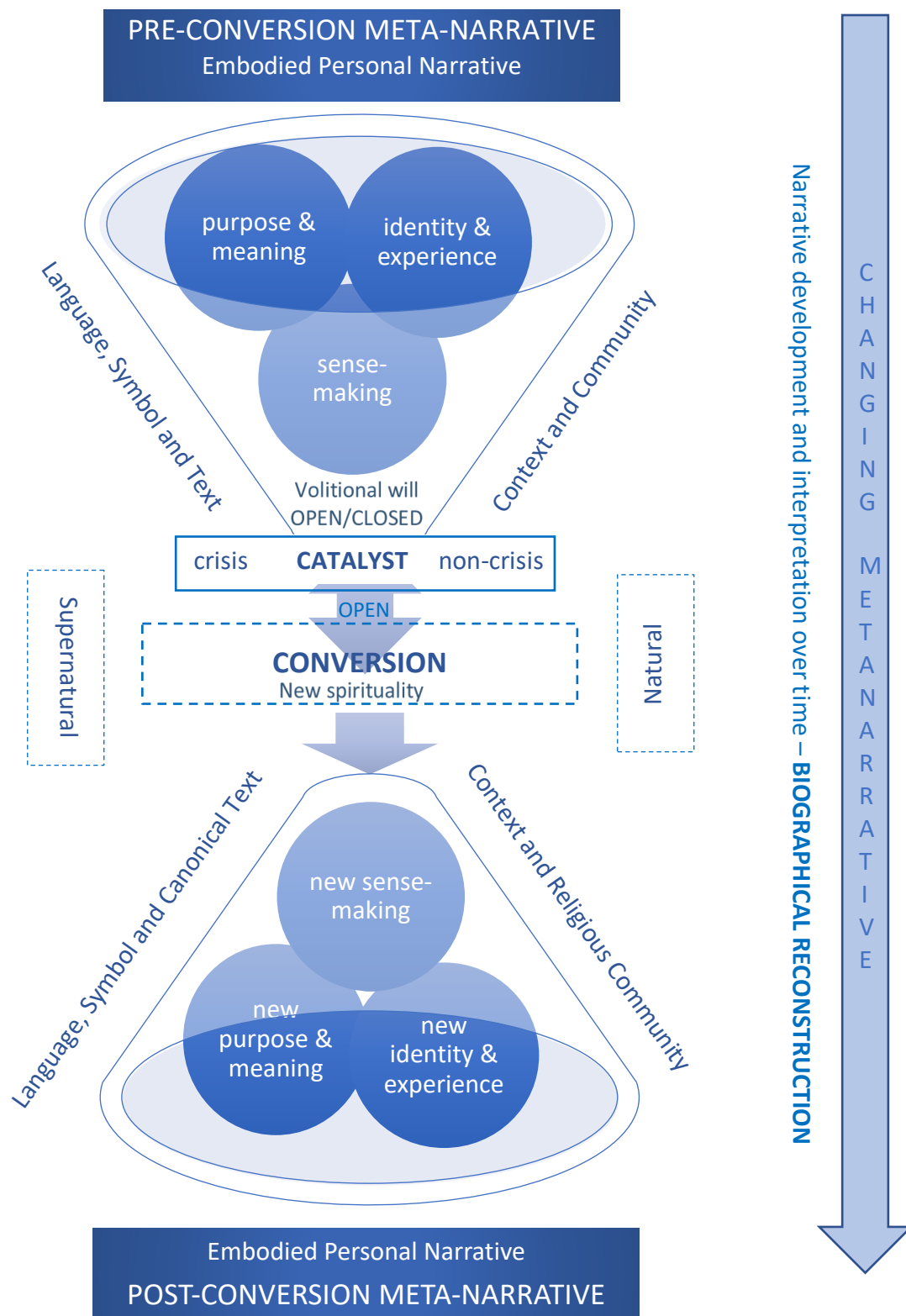


Figure 06. Religious Conversion Narrative Analysis Approach

Although this paradigm presupposes a critical realist view of reality, it does not preclude its viability for those who presume a social constructionist perspective. It is

variable-oriented, appreciating the respective presence and interaction of influences effecting change including functional and substantive influences in belief formation and change.

Probable causal pathways were based upon literature review, auto-narratives and surveys.⁶⁰

The variables (purpose/meaning, identity/experience, sensemaking, volitional will, supernatural and natural influences) distinctly act or dynamically interact with one another to move individuals towards conversion within varying contexts and communities. The comprehensive nature of this model allows for diversity of conversion patterns. In addition to endorsing both Substance and Function as integrative motivators, this paradigm seeks to provide an inclusive framework for conversion, acknowledges the temporal process, and allows for laterality and individuality of each unique experience in time (i.e., sudden versus gradual) internal temperament (i.e., analytical/logical versus emotional/existential) and external influences (i.e., socio-cultural, educational variables). It also affirms the profundity of religious experience and role of the supernatural in altering an individual's perspective and willingness to move from resistance against to gravitation towards God. Finally, this model confirms the inter-dimensionality and dynamic storied nature of the narrative analysis model of religious conversion. It appreciates the ongoing transformational nature of conversion and will be used as a guide for narrative analysis within this study.

In order to understand the narrative context in the research at hand, an introduction to Atheism, Atheist and Christian narrative in Western culture will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁶⁰ BAZELEY, P. 2013. *Qualitative Data Analysis, Practical Strategies*, Los Angeles, Sage. According to researcher Pat Bazeley, narrative interviews by nature 'captures the importance of context, the meaningfulness of human experience, thought and speech within time and place; it provides opportunity to understand implicit as well as explicit rationale for action within a holistic framework...is seeking comprehensiveness of understanding within the individual case...provides data about the temporal ordering of factors being considered along with information about other potentially intervening factors in the causal relationship.' However, due to potential issues with biographical reconstruction, model building and determining causality is best served when narrative is combined with quantitative statistical analysis, p. 342.

4.0. SETTING THE RESEARCH CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING ATHEISM, ATHEIST and CHRISTIAN NARRATIVE in WESTERN CULTURE

4.1. Introduction

In order to address thesis question A3 to provide a background and context for the populations and narratives studied within this thesis, the first portion of this chapter reviews the definition, typology, demographics, and narrative of naturalistic Atheism in Western culture. The second half considers Christian narrative from canonical, community, and conversion perspectives.

4.2. Atheism

4.2.1. Atheism Definition and Typology

Williamson and Yancey (2013, p. 1) define the term ‘Atheism’ and place it into historical perspective:

Atheism, the affirmative belief that *there is no* God (and usually no supernatural as well), has been around since religion asserted that *There is a God* – which essentially comprises all of recorded human history. Its message and who self-identifies as an Atheist, however, seem to have morphed over the ages, depending on the religious beliefs of the day...Because Atheism always seeks to negate religion, then the form and message of Atheism changes over time to counter religious influences.

Regarding context, Bainbridge (2009, p. 320) clarifies, ‘In a monotheistic society, an Atheist may be someone who simply does not subscribe to a belief in God while in a polytheistic society, an Atheist may be one who does not believe in *enough* gods.’ For Bremmer (2007), within modern Western contexts Atheism means different things depending on changing conceptions of God. Pointing to its Greek roots, *a* means ‘without’ and *theos* means ‘god’, suggests an Atheist as someone without a belief in God. He contrasts this with a popular view of Atheism as ‘one who believes that there is no God or gods’. Bainbridge (2009) and Keysar and Navarro-Rivera (2013) recognize ‘positive’, ‘explicit’, ‘strong’ Atheists (*I don’t believe in God*) and ‘negative’, ‘implicit’, ‘weak’ Atheists (*I lack a belief in God*). According to the American Atheists’ current website, their advertised view aligns more closely with negative Atheism:

Atheism is one thing: A lack of belief in gods. Atheism is not an affirmative belief that there is no god, nor does it answer any other question about what a person believes. It is simply a rejection of the assertion that there are gods. Atheism is too often defined incorrectly as a belief system. *To be clear: Atheism is not a disbelief in gods or a denial of gods; it is a lack of belief in gods.*

Older dictionaries define Atheism as ‘a belief that there is no God’. Clearly, theistic influence taints these definitions. The fact that dictionaries define Atheism as ‘there is no God’ betrays the (mono)theistic influence. Without the (mono)theistic influence, the definition would at least read ‘there are no gods’.

In academic study, Bullivant (2014, p. 17) argues a ‘frustrating morass of contradictions and cross-purposes’ exists in defining Atheism and that no single, objective definition exists. However, setting the context for the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, editor Bullivant defines Atheism as ‘an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods...an absence of something called ‘theism’. Importantly, it does not *require* a specific denial or rejection of, nor any animus against, this ‘theism’ - although, also importantly, it does not rule it out.’⁶¹

This definition of Atheism concurs with Streib and Klein (2018) and Mawson (2013) who assert Atheism is characterized by denial of God’s existence, typically a culturally dominant, specifically *theistic* image of God, with as many varieties of Atheism as belief in God. Atheists self-identify using a variety of labels, including skeptic, freethinker, religious none, ‘Bright’, positive atheists, agnostic-Atheist, humanist, anti-theist, apatheist, secularist, secular humanist, spiritual but not religious, or non-theist. Bradley (2014) claims one reason for Atheists’ many identity labels is the desire to define themselves in terms of positive beliefs rather than simply the lack of belief in god or gods. Lee (2013, pp. 592, 595) emphasizes, ‘being Atheist is not a purely negative or subtractive state’, but rather ‘practicing Atheists are those from whom Atheism and beliefs manifest in a huge variety of forms’. Silver (2014) agrees that a variety of Atheism exists which also acknowledge presence of

⁶¹ BULLIVANT, S. 2013. Defining ‘Atheism’. In: RUSE, S. B. M. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. First ed. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. ‘God’ in this definition ‘signifies the ‘genre’ of God traditionally worshipped in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam...a supreme, personal, transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent Creator’ such as the ‘Judeo-Christian God’ or the ‘God of Classical Theism’. Supreme beings of other monotheistic religion belief systems can also be classified as God but not with the same characteristics. The second category of ‘gods’ do not possess a set of essential characteristics.

hostility towards organized religion and theistic beliefs in the name of reason, freedom, and autonomy. His qualitative interview study (N=59) resulted in a typology of six different categories of nonbelief including: Academic Atheists (37.6%), Activist Atheist/Agnostics (23.0%), Seeker Agnostics (7.6%), Anti-theists (14.8%), Non-Theists (4.4%), and Ritual Atheists (12.5%). Based upon his doctoral research (N = 1153) he found that non-religiosity varies because secular identity and activity are multi-dimensional and diverse, confirming typology as fluid, subject to change over the course of a person's life. With this diversity in mind, Quillen (2015) resists the idea of scholars imposing a definition upon Atheists in academic research. For him, proper discourse analysis commends the definition of Atheism be given by the Atheists themselves. The researcher's role is to access the Atheists' conceptions of Atheism through dialogue.

4.2.2. Atheism Demographics

4.2.2.1. Atheist Population, Western Culture

From a global perspective, Keysar and Navarro-Rivera (2013) report 450 to 700 million nonbelievers worldwide, seven percent of the total population, including both positive Atheists (*'I don't believe in God'*) and negative Atheists (*'I lack a belief in God'*).

Zuckerman (2007) reviewed demographic studies and estimated between 500-750 million people do not believe in God. The highest prevalence of atheism was found among Western countries: Australia 24-25%, Canada 19-30%, New Zealand 20-22%, Britain 8-39%, and France 19-54%. He theorized that nations with the highest rates 'organic Atheism' are characterized by high degrees of individual and societal security, societal health, low poverty rates and strong gender equality. Atheist or agnostic. International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) (2008) reports percentage of positive Atheists: France 24%, Australia 16%, United Kingdom 14%, New Zealand 13%, and United States 3%. They reported a rise in public Atheism due to the publication of best-selling books on Atheism, increased use of the internet, and aftermath of terrorism on 11 September 2001. In their view, popular level Atheism is increasing, becoming less ideological. Lee (2013) agrees characteristics of radical

Atheism are dissipating towards a more mainstream, intrinsic form within Western Europe. More recently, Win/Gallup International Association (2015) polled 63,898 people globally to determine religious belief for 65 countries. In the West, approximately one in ten (11%) considered themselves ‘convinced Atheists’: France 18%, Australia 14%, United Kingdom 13%, Canada 12% and United States 6%.

Determining an accurate count of Atheists in the West is a difficult task due to the perceived social undesirability of Atheism according to Gervais (2017). He explains that many Atheists refrain from self-identification even in anonymous polls and that polling numbers vary, particularly where rates of Atheism are lower such as in the United States. While Pew Research Center (2014) confirms 3.1% positive self-identification as Atheist in America, a Gallup poll (2017) shows 12% who deny belief in God when given a binary yes/no choice. Gervais (2017) measured Atheist prevalence in America through pooling two representative samples together (N = 4000). Sample I revealed Atheism rates much higher than existing self-reports at 32% while Sample II yielded Atheism rate estimate of 20%. The variance between the two samples reflected the difference in inquiry (Sample I allowed a passive ‘lack of belief’ in theism/God; Sample II positively affirmed Atheism ‘I do not believe in God’). Aggregate analysis indicates an Atheism prevalence rate of 26% or more than 80 million American Atheists, ‘substantially higher’ than Pew or Gallup numbers, presumed due to the method of assessment which takes away any perceived social pressure as present in telephone polling.

Regarding age and gender of Atheists in North America, for Gervais (2017, p. 17) Atheism prevalence increases among younger populations in America - among Millennials (21%) as compared to Baby Boomers (14%). Caldwell-Harris’s (2011) survey study of American Atheists (N = 42) showed 13% ‘never believed’, 29% self-identified as Atheists under age 15, 37% between 15-24 years old, and 21% at age 25 and older. Pew Research Foundation (2013) reported on the ratio of male/female Atheists in the United States of America as more likely to be male (68%), inferring that 32% are women. Atheists are

younger: 38% of the Atheists are ages 18-29. In North America the male/female percentage is similar in Canada (64.3% male/35.7% female), U.S. (65.8% male/34.2% female), and Mexico (67.6% male/32.4% female). Regarding age of Atheists in the United Kingdom, a British Social Attitudes Survey by NatCen (Bulman, 2017) report 71% of people age 18-24 identify with 'no religion' (up from 62% in 2015), approximately 40% of people age 65-74 and 27% of people over 75 identify with 'no religion'. A survey conducted by Bullivant, European Social Survey / Europe's Young Adults and Religion (2014-2016) reported the percentage of Western 16-29-year-old persons identify with no religion: UK 70% and France 65%. Only 26% of French young adults and 21% of British young adults identify with some form of Christianity with only 2% affiliation as Protestant in both countries. According to Bullivant, many young Europeans 'will have been baptized and then never darken the door of a church again. Cultural religious identities just aren't being passed on from parents to children. It just washes straight off them'. Overall, the number of persons who identify with 'no religion' and Atheism is growing in Western countries, most notably within the younger demographic.

4.2.2.2. Atheist Education and Intellect

Intellectual prowess and educational achievement are often associated with self-identified Atheists. Altemeyer, Hunsberger and Brown (2006) surveyed 837 Australian first year university psychology majors in order to determine factors influencing nonbelief. Intellectual orientation was the best predictor of nonbelief among this population. They maintained that self-reports highlight enjoyment of intellectual discussions, debating religious issues, and considering oneself intellectually oriented collectively proved to be the best predictors of apostate versus non-apostate status. Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006, p. 40) surveyed active university Atheists and their parents. When questioned about their doubts regarding religion and religious beliefs, 'the matters that weighed heaviest...involved ideas. Did religious teachings make sense? Did they correspond with scientific evidence? Could they stand up to examination and criticism? Religion, for these people, failed these

tests.’ The majority of those surveyed once believed in God but began to doubt during adolescence (median age of 15-18) for various reasons (such as the bible, education, problem of evil, religious hypocrisy, moral and gender imperatives, pluralism, negative history of Christianity). In sum, (p. 54), belief ‘bled through multiple wounds but the letting typically flowed for intellectual, not emotional or personal reasons’. Bradley et al. (2017) confirmed intellectual reasons were the most highly endorsed reasons for nonbelief in God among possible intellectual, emotional, social, experiential, and intuitive reasons. Kanazawa (2010) investigated the hypothesis that more intelligent individuals are more likely to be Atheists than less intelligent individuals. Based upon two large representative samples from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and General Social Surveys, the data suggests intelligence predicts espousal of Atheism. More intelligent individuals have a significantly weaker belief in God and significantly less intense religiosity.

From a socio-demographic perspective, Atheists are reported to have higher education levels. Streib and Klein (2018) assert the link between higher education and Atheism as a classic finding within psychology of religion. Beit-Hallahmi (2006) affirms Atheists in the U.S. as younger, mostly male, with higher levels of education and income who tend to be politically liberal, and in Australia as better educated than the rest of the population. Globally, demographers Keysar and Navarro-Rivera (2013, p. 571) report Atheism is ‘especially common among people with advanced education’. Williamson and Yancey (2013, p. 39) argue with confidence [that] the typical Atheist in the United States is a highly educated, wealthy, older, white male. They also claim Atheists are often associated with higher intelligence, intellectual elites, academics (particularly in the human sciences), and eminent scientists. For Cragun et al. (2013), in North America, Atheists are likely young, male, single or married, employed full-time or students, highly educated but not necessarily wealthier, live in large cities, are politically liberal, and are irreligious. They think less about purpose and meaning in life and have a lightly lower satisfaction in life than theists.

In the West, this high level of education and may reflect the rational, scientific, cultural, social and/or educational emphases placed upon Atheistic ideology. According to Pew Research Center (2016), the average educational attainment for the ‘religiously unaffiliated’ averages 13.2 years in North America and 12.0 years in Europe. Average educational attainment for Christians in North America is 12.7 years and 10.8 years in Europe, slightly lower. Further, Pew (2016) reports Atheists as more likely to be white and highly educated with 43% Atheists holding a college degree as compared to 27% of the general public in the United States. Examining 1988-2000 General Social Surveys (GSS), Sherkat (2008) determined educational attainment decreases certainty in belief in God. Across North America, Cragun (2013) reports all three countries show a significant difference in educational attainment with Atheists 10-15% more likely to achieve upper levels of education than theists.⁶² Williamson and Yancey (2013) confirm advanced education as associated with Atheism. In their online study of Atheists, 40.2% held a graduate degree and among their interview respondents, 35.3% held a graduate degree. Zuckerman’s (2011) research interviewing 87 Atheists concurred with these findings regarding an increased level of education among Atheists: 5% completed high school only, 30% completed some college, 33% completed a bachelor’s degree, and 30% completed a graduate degree. According to the Pew Research Foundation study (2015), the educational norm among Atheists in North America (43% college degree) is higher than the general population (29% college degree). Higher education correlated with lower prayer frequency in Baker’s (2008) research.

The consensus among researchers of high intellect and high education levels among Atheists bears consideration in investigating not only their reasons for Atheism, but also their motivations for conversion. LeDrew (2012) distinguishes between scientific Atheism often associated with the New Atheism (based in Darwinism and the Enlightenment) and

⁶² CRAGUN, R. T., HAMMER, J. H. & SMITH, J. M. Ibid. North America. In: RUSE, S. B. A. M. (ed.). Education level is higher among Atheists as compared to theists in North America at the ‘upper level’ with Canada: 38.6% (Atheists) vs 25.7% (theists), U.S. 59.8% (Atheists) vs 45.9% (theists), and Mexico 31.6% (Atheists) vs 16.6% (theists), pp. 604, 606-607.

humanistic Atheism (pioneered by Marx and Feuerbach) aligned with the rise of social sciences. Although the contemporary Atheist movements are primarily rooted in the scientific tradition, the humanistic tradition still plays a role. Cragun (2015) asserts the rise of scientific Atheism came to prominence in the West in the early twenty-first century with the release of several books from prominent scientist considered the 'New Atheists'. Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* (2004), Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006), and Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2007) initiated a movement in 2004 promoting Atheist and freethought activism. For LeDrew (2013), the New Atheists see Atheism as the end point of a gradual progression from religiously fueled ignorance to scientific enlightenment. They reject all elements of supernatural belief and religion and instead place their trust in science. However, Cragun is clear to point out not all Atheists have the distinctly irreligious characteristics of the New Atheists as they may not reject all notions of the supernatural and may be less confident in science to provide meaningful answers to existential questions.

The majority of Atheists (between 70-80%) in the United States (approximately 13-16 million Americans) exhibit characteristics of New Atheists. According to Cragun (2015), 27% of 'New Atheists' have post-graduate degrees, twice the educational attainment of other Atheists (13%) non-religious (13%), and Mainline Protestants (14%), and more than three times post-graduate education of Evangelical Protestants (7%). In light of this research, investigating Atheists entails an understanding of them as generally more intelligent and highly educated than the general population. Although their Atheism may be motivated for intellectual and scientific reasons, other (humanistic, moral) motivations may contribute to their beliefs and should be considered in research. Their self-identification as an intellectual population may have bearing, particularly in religious conversion to a religious group that is not perceived to be intelligent or educated.

4.3. Atheism and Nonbelief in Academic Study

Researchers contend Atheism has been historically neglected by the human sciences in lieu of focus on religion and religious conversion (Bullivant, 2008; LeDrew, 2013, J.M.

Smith, 2013, Greksa, 2015, Coleman, et. al., 2018, Streib and Klein, 2018). Beit-Hallahmi (2006) proposes the neglect of Atheism within modern human sciences is primarily due to the dominant religiosity among the majority of humanity, and secondarily because of the lack of felt need for Atheistic researchers to explain themselves.⁶³ However, increased interest of the nonbeliever (Atheist, agnostic, the ‘nones’) among researchers initiated a recent wave of academic study to better understand this growing population in the West (Silver, et al, 2014), Streib and Klein, 2018). Bullivant and Lee (2012, pp. 19, 21-22) report growing numbers of sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists, among others, have turned their attention in the twenty-first century towards non-religious phenomena as something to be ‘understood as positive and concrete subjects in their own right...[not motivated] by their allegedly ‘problematic’ nature but by the recognition that they are a significant, ‘normal’, and potentially normative sector of society’.⁶⁴ Streib and Klein (2018) maintain this new interest is due in part to considerable increase of religious non-affiliation in the United States. For Lee (2013, p. 588) social sciences have only recently begun to take serious interest in Atheism and nonreligion, stating, ‘Hitherto, scholars have been interested in Atheism merely as a measure of the (declining) pervasiveness and popularity of *theism*, rather than whether and how being an Atheist directly shapes the individual’s experience of the world’. This turn towards directed study of Atheism prompts a more critical analysis of the beliefs informing naturalistic Atheism.

4.3.1. Negative and Positive Beliefs of Naturalistic Atheism

Naturalistic Atheism is a particular form of Atheism espousing specific beliefs regarding natural and metaphysical reality. For Oppy (2013, p. 53) ‘Atheism is the rejection

⁶³ BEIT-HALLAHMI, B. 2006. Atheists - A Psychological Profile. In: MARTIN, M. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*. Cambridge University: Cambridge University Press. Beit-Hallahmi mentions that most of the great names in modern human sciences have been Atheists or agnostics, including Marx, Freud, Durkheim, Malinowski, and Weber, who ‘looked at religion from the outside’.

⁶⁴ BULLIVANT, S. & LEE, L. 2012. Interdisciplinary Studies of Non-religion and Secularity: The State of the Union. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27, 19-27. The Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC) was founded in 2005; and, the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN) was founded in 2008 by researchers based in Cambridge and Oxford.

of theism: *a-theism*, and maintaining theism is false, unbelievable, rationally unacceptable and/or morally unacceptable'. Further, he contends naturalism, 'the claim that there are none but natural causes, beings, and forces in the natural world', is inconsistent with theism and supernaturalism. Both cannot be true. According to Lorkowski (2013), the naturalistic position claims the natural world exists and nothing outside of the natural world affects the natural world. Alternatively, the theistic view claims the natural world exists and at least one supernatural entity exists and has affected the natural world. For the naturalist, the theist makes more positive claims about reality and is thought to bear a greater burden of proof. However, Copan (2015) emphasizes that dismissal of theism necessitates embracing of another worldview. If Atheism makes the knowledge-claim that *God does not exist*, this stance is in just as much need of justification as the theist's claim, *God exists*. Both bear the burden of proof since both make claims. For Copan, the naturalist must explain important features of the universe and of human existence (such as presumed personal responsibility, personhood, rationality, duties, human value in addition to the beginning, fine-tuning, and beauties of the universe), just as required by the theist.

In recent years, investigators advocate for Atheist beliefs, values, and worldviews to be considered apart from reference to religion. Rather than being seen only in negative contrast with theism, Atheism should be researched as to its positively held beliefs. Catto and Eccles (2013) argue that Atheism requires distinct yet related treatment from religion. Silver (2014, pp. 991-992) claims nonbelief does not always require a religio-spiritual point of reference, but can be explored autonomously, 'in its own right, *and* on its own terms'. He advocates 'for secular peoples and nonbelievers to be understood, categorized, and researched without always being opposed to, or in relation to religion/belief...Social scientists could also situate 'secularity' or 'nonbelief' as a cultural fact that needs no juxtaposition with other constructs such as religion or belief for its exploration – it merely becomes something that is a fact independent of other ontologies.'

Coleman, et al. (2013, pp. 1-2) contends nonbelievers unnecessarily assume an oppositional identity in relation to religion. [Being] ‘defined by the absence of *something* cannot always function as a normative point of reference in which to tell researchers *what* to look for’. Further, they remind researchers, ‘we do not merely research who someone is not – we research who they are’ (p .3). In response, Coleman advises focus on what is believed and experienced (‘horizontal transcendence’ or encounters with awe, wonder, and beauty) instead of what is not believed (a religious reference point or ‘vertical transcendence’) to provide a normative trajectory. Later, Coleman (2018, p. 4) affirms ‘Atheists...value other things, have other beliefs, other worldview, and other sources of meaning worthy of investigation in their own right...[They] conceal a wide range of positive’ beliefs, values, behaviors, and worldviews’. He suggests independent areas of inquiry include level of self-mastery and individualism, self-constructed meaning and morality as well as participation in ritual and community. For Coleman, intellectual and scientific interests, dogmatism of beliefs, and horizontal transcendence also hold interest for researchers, reporting Pew Research Center findings that half of Atheists (54%) frequently feel a deep sense of wonder about the universe, more than Christians (45%).

This theoretical and practical movement towards disassociation from theism promotes Atheism as an independent belief system to be more fully explored. Taves, Asprem, and Ihm (2018) promote shifting from the term ‘religion’ to ‘worldview’ so that Atheism and nonreligious claims can be considered apart from reference to religious claims on the big questions that humans ask.⁶⁵ For them, using worldview language is appropriate for conceptualizing sense- and meaning-making, and enables autonomous study of non-religious worldviews. In reviewing studies on the values, belief, opinions and worldviews of Atheists, Zuckerman (2009, pp. 953-954) asserts Atheists ‘have very clear and pronounced values and

⁶⁵ TAVES, A., ASPREM, E. & IHM, E. 2018. Psychology, meaning making and the study of worldviews: Beyond religion and non-religion. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 10. The big questions [BQs] humans ask, per Taves et al, are questions of Ontology (What exists?), Axiology (What is good and bad?), Praxeology (How do we act?), and Epistemology (How do we know what is true about the world?)

beliefs concerning moral, political and social issues’. Lee (2014, pp. 468-469) also argues that Atheism and/or nonreligion should not require a negative relationship to religion, but be seen as a different, ‘related, more inclusive concept’, that ‘nonreligion can be used descriptively, to outline the presence, nature and impact of distinctive [positive] social phenomena’. In light of these contemporary voices, Atheist beliefs as well as rational and non-rational motivations for beliefs are explored in the next section.

4.3.2. Atheist Motivations for Belief

Increased interest in Atheism over the past decade has prompted research studying causes of and processes towards Atheistic belief. Historically, Atheism has been presumed to be primarily an intellectual phenomenon. Hunsberger and Altemeyer’s (2006) investigation of Atheists showed ‘things more cerebral’ produced more doubts regarding the existence of God. For Lee (2013), social-scientific knowledge of the nature and variety of Atheist experiences in Western culture has been limited. However, non-intellectual, culturally-driven influences are beginning to be recognized and studied. Caldwell-Harris et al. survey study (2011) of American Atheists (N = 42) demonstrated a mixture of reasons for disbelief, including issues of science and logic, university influence, as well as negative experience with and/or views of religion/church.

Table 07. Caldwell-Harris Survey Study of American Atheists - Reasons for Non-Belief

How did you come to the belief that God did not exist?			
Didn't make logical sense	47%	Other	21%
Didn't comply with science	12%	'Eyes opened to new world views in college'	
Disappointment/emotional	0%	'It just occurred to me there was no one living in the sky or they had no effect on my life'	
Negative personal experience	9%		
Hypocrisy of religion/church	15%	'By the time I was in college I was a total feminist and continue to be to this day. Most [religions] seem heavily patriarchal and obsessed with obedience and punishment.'	
God did not meet expectation	3%		
Don't remember	6%		
Left blank	15%	Note: Percentages sum to 128% because some respondents provided more than one reason	

[Green: substance intellectual; Yellow: functional; Blue: substance spiritual; highlighting added to show varied motivations]

These findings concur with Hunsberger and Altemeyer's results indicating intellectual reasons were the primary motivators towards Atheism, as nearly half (47%) indicated belief in God was not logical. However, other non-rational, experiential motivations also surfaced:

Zuckerman (2011) interviewed 87 apostates from religious faith in order to understand process and cause of their rejection of religion. The majority reported disbelief as a gradual process due to numerous factors working in conjunction with one another, steadily compounding over time. The most reported reasons for apostacy included parental influence (lack of religious commitment), secular education (university), misfortune (loss or pain), exposure to other cultures and religions, social relationships (friends, colleagues, lovers), politics (opposing personal beliefs), sex (moral imposition and guilt), Satan and hell (offensive), malfeasance of religious associates (producing unease, disappointment or repugnance), and an internal disposition towards secularity (it was 'natural' for them). In sum, he reported a variety of life circumstances, personal experiences, and social dynamics as motivating rejection of religion. J.M. Smith's (2011) sample group (N = 40) corresponded with the high level of education often associated with religiously unaffiliated.⁶⁶ In his study, motivations towards Atheist belief and identity were socially, experientially, and intellectually-driven with four major elements constructing the Atheist identity: First, the participants described typically growing up within a religious culture. Secondly, they moved towards questioning theism through encountering new relationships and other points of view through education. Doubts about God were compounded by observation of religious hypocrisy. Thirdly, they began to reject and 'unlearn' theism and religious identity, perceiving religion as an uncritical and unsophisticated worldview as compared with a more accurate and desirable rational scientific approach. Finally, participants 'came out' as Atheists, applying the label to themselves and then in the presence of others. Smith calls

⁶⁶ SMITH, J. M. 2011b. Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism. *Sociology of Religion*, 72, 215-237. half held post-graduate degrees (10 Masters only, 4 enrolled in PhD, 4 completed PhD = 18/40, 45%), fifteen more held bachelor's degree (15/40, 37.5%), six had some college (6/30, 15%). One held only a high school diploma. For clarification, Smith defines four major steps in forming Atheist identity: 1) realization of the 'ubiquity of theism', 2) questioning theism, 3) rejecting theism, and 4) coming out Atheist.

Atheism ‘a rejection identity constructed through articulating what it is one does *not* believe...it is part of the ‘not-self’’.⁶⁷

LeDrew (2013) sought to determine how Atheists became or discovered Atheism. Through interviewing 15 people⁶⁸, he identified three basic paths from religious socialization to Atheism: 1) discovering new ideas and proceeding through a period of doubt to a ‘conversion to Atheism’, 2) discovering Atheism as something about the self that was latent or only partially realized, and 3) discovering Atheism as belief system and collective identity that converges with the individual’s own. He also identified two basic paths from secular socialization: 4) embracing collective secularization as an individual ideology without a period of doubt; and, 5) embracing secular ideology after a period of religious questing and doubt. LeDrew moved beyond a stage model (Smith, 2011) towards one allowing for varying factors to play a role as a person disengages from or rejects cultural and/or institutional expressions of religion in exchange for a naturalistic, scientific, nontheistic worldview:

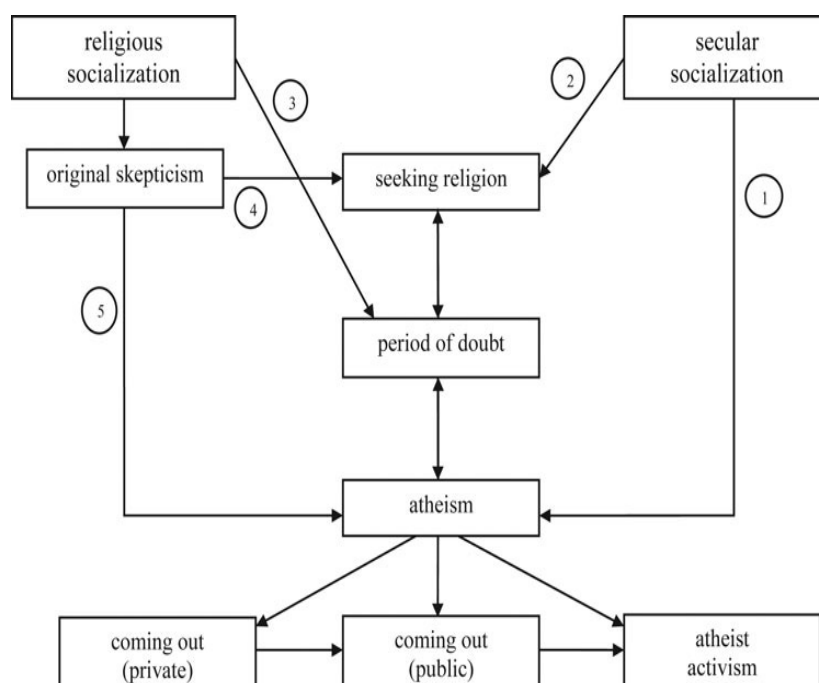


Figure 07. S. LeDrew's Trajectories to Atheism

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 233. 'Not-self' references to Paul Colomy's 'The Not Self' concept presented at a 2007 conference.

⁶⁸ LEDREW, S. 2013. Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism. Ibid. 74, 431-453. p. 433. Within this group, 5/15 (33%) held post-graduate degree, 7/15 (46.6%) held a bachelor's degree, 3/15 (20%) attended some college. This educated profile fits with the view of Atheists as intelligent, educated collective.

In considering LeDrew's model, Smith (2013) concurs 'Atheist identity formation is not a neat, uniform, linear process for all (or even most) Atheists'. However, he questions the role of socialization in causation and self-identification of Atheists. Smith also challenges the primary Atheist stereotype as the educated, white male, questioning how minority Atheists fit within the standard trajectory. He resists capturing Atheist identity formation within a model and rather advises anticipation of a more pluralistic 'many paths' conceptualization in order to broaden the boundaries of inclusion, process, and outcomes.

Catto and Eccles (2013, pp. 38-40) conducted a mixed-method study with 15 British Atheists, ages 16-26, analyzing completed personal profiles and interview narratives. Taking a pragmatic, narrative approach, they focused upon the process of (dis)believing, belonging, and activities related to Atheism demonstrating 'how beliefs work in the lives of young Atheists'. They found that Atheists 'operate with a similar understanding of religious belief', understood as 'embedded in context and relationships'.⁶⁹ Atheists emphasized the positive content of their beliefs rather than merely disbelief in God, as in this quoted excerpt (p. 43):

I believe in the non-existence of god rather than I don't believe. Same but to me, you know, it does make a difference because it is more of a positive spin on it. [...] It's something I can grasp and that I can take ownership, and this is my belief.

Catto and Eccles (2013) perceived emotional, experiential as well as intellectual aspects of belief as informing Atheists' views regarding religion, religious people, educational, moral, and societal pursuits. In their study, all respondents told specific stories of what had led them to Atheism. Their reported non-belief was developed through relationships, including negative 'emotional encounters with explicitly religious people'. The narratives clearly showed deeply held commitments with beliefs, expressed in emotive language and associated with emotional experiences. In their view, Atheism is an identity developed through 'conflictual and convivial' personal interactions. Atheists generally valued liberal,

⁶⁹ CATTO, R. & ECCLES, J. 2013. (Dis)Believing and Belonging: Investigating the Narratives of Young British Atheists. *Temenos - Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, 49, 37-63. Their sample was 'biased in favour of the more educated, which is in keeping with the statistical profile on non-religion in Britain...and all were white, which also fits with the national profile', p. 42.

progressive ideals, faith in humanity, freedom, equality, rational pursuit of truth and science. Through their research, these authors appreciate Atheism as a multifaceted identity which develops over time and through experience. Beliefs and values are formed within varying contexts of experiences and relationships.

By contrast, Hood and Chen (2013) simplified motivations for Atheism, proposing two main types: ‘emotional Atheism’ (with causes ranging from neurosis or personal crisis to absent/defective fathering and attachment theories) and ‘positive Atheism’ (as a gradual process of education, science and/or socialization). In his thesis, Bradley (2014, pp. 12-18, 52) investigated reasons for nonbelief in God from an emic view (N=520, U.S.) through participation in a one-hour survey.⁷⁰ Participants were asked to endorse reasons for non-belief including: Intellectual (rational argumentation based on philosophy or science), God Relational (character or actions of god(s) that are proposed to exist along with subsequent experiences of disappointment, anger, or mistrust), Socialization (influenced by the beliefs of those around him or her – individuals and/or sociocultural environment), Anti-religion (negative experiences with religious individuals and institutions), and Intuitive (decisions based on preconscious factors not directly articulated), Emotional (negative emotional feelings towards god(s)), Agnostic (abstaining from both belief and disbelief in god(s)), and Existential (meaning, connection to others and the universe, facing death). The endorsed reasons for non-belief show intellectual rationale as the primary motivator for disbelief, followed by intuitive, experiential, emotional, and relational factors:

Table 08. Bradley Atheism Study - Reasons for Non-Belief (2014)

Variable	Descriptive Statistics	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
<i>Reasons for Nonbelief</i>				
Intellectual		79.46	26.15	0-100
Emotional (Negative)		23.93	29.00	0-100
Emotional (Positive)		24.80	30.08	0-100
Socialization		26.42	29.58	0-100
Bad experience with religion		42.54	36.06	0-100
Intuitive		53.74	32.69	0-100
Good experience with secularism		38.64	34.83	0-100
Relational		35.23	34.43	0-100

[Green: substance intellectual; Yellow: functional; highlighting added to show varied motivations]

⁷⁰ Slightly over forty percent (40.6%) held college and/or post-graduate degree (120/520, 23.2% four-year degree; 90/520, 17.4% attended/completed graduate school).

This study and its findings are pertinent to this research based upon its inclusion of an educated Atheist population (40.3% college and/or post-graduate educated), inclusion of both substantive and functional variables as reasons for disbelief, the finding of substance as the most prevalent influence towards nonbelief, and finally, the outcome demonstrating mixed substantive and functional variables as motivating nonbelief.

Greksa's (2015) thesis investigated individual, biographical experiences of college Atheists in order to determine the role of university in 'crystallizing' the Atheist identity process initiated in childhood and/or adolescence. She studied their background factors, process, salience, and stigmatization of adopting an Atheist identity. Through conducting 14 semi-structured interviews at Colorado University, she identified three primary themes as contributing to the process and Atheist identity formation of college students. These themes included 'precursors to Atheism' (socio-cultural, religious, familial, experiential, and intellectual background), 'pathways to Atheism' (experiences, processes, skepticism, and beliefs), and 'experiences with an Atheist identity' after self-identifying as an Atheist. The Pathways to Atheism subthemes included functional influences (negative experiences with religion, traumatic experience, and friends) as well as substantive influences ('I never really believed any of it' as well as 'questioning [religious] beliefs' both externally and internally). Greksa (2015, pp. 71-72) emphasizes, 'A very important part of adopting an Atheist identity was a questioning period...almost all of my participants experienced this questioning phase sometime before college, most commonly in middle school and high school'. Since Atheists typically demonstrate a questioning period in moving towards an Atheist identity, this raises the potentiality of similar occurrence if and when an Atheist changes belief towards Christianity. Does this substantive tendency hold in a different circumstance (or conversion career)? Do Atheist converts to Christianity experience a doubting period of their own beliefs prior to changing beliefs and converting to Christianity?

Alternatively, from a psychological perspective, scholars have attributed expressed Atheistic beliefs to more internal sources. As a cognitive scientist, Shackelford (2005, p. 376)

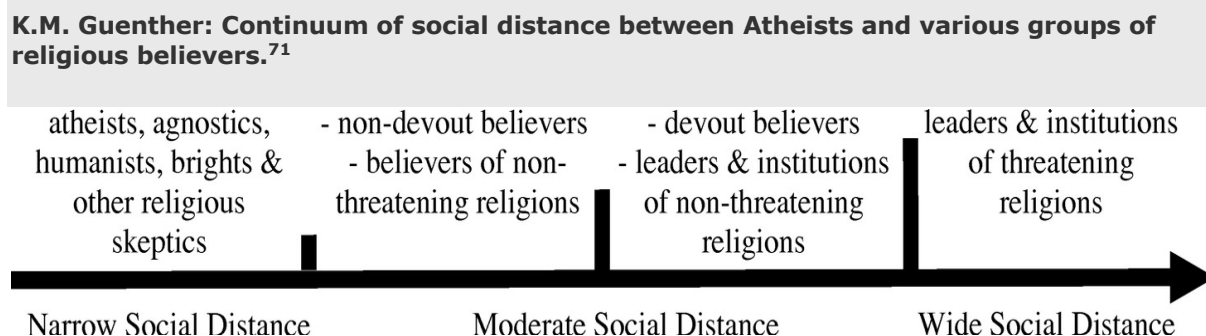
contends psychological processes can inform reasoning. Bering (2010) asserts that an Atheist's implicit beliefs (such as meaning and purpose in living, psychological continuance after death) often conflict with their expressed explicit beliefs. Lanman (2013, 484-486) also highlights the difference between Atheists' implicit, non-reflective beliefs which can differ from explicit, reflective beliefs. Implicit beliefs 'continuously guide our actions', are 'detected through our behavior', and are not typically the focus of Atheism scholarship. Instead, 'most scholarship on Atheism concerns itself with explicit beliefs and their ties to particular socio-cultural contexts, conscious reasoning, and social identities'. Lanman suggests (based upon Bering's work), that an Atheist's underlying implicit belief in the existence of a supernatural agency can be triggered by discourse to rise to the surface of functioning as modifying behavior, providing meaning, comfort, or security.

Although Farias (2013, p. 469) insists Atheists have distinct ontological, epistemological, and ethical beliefs about reality, he also proposes these beliefs are motivated for functional reasons, stating, 'An individual who denies or lacks beliefs in gods will hold other, meaningful, types of beliefs that can provide a basis to distinguish what is right and wrong, as well as offer emotional reassurance, very much like supernatural beliefs do for a religious individual'. Because beliefs operate at cognitive, motivational and emotional levels, Farias asserts beliefs can have a comforting role in our lives by alleviating uncertainty and anxiety, functioning in an implicit, automatic way. As people are naturally predisposed towards belief, Farias (pp. 471- 474) sets forth a 'belief replacement hypothesis' whereby when religion is rejected as a belief system, another belief system is intuitively chosen to replace it in order to serve a psychological function of providing order, structure, and stability. He states, 'Atheists will espouse various types of naturalistic beliefs that are meaningful, help them to explain the world and, ultimately play a compensatory role in dealing with adverse circumstances...it is not so much the content of the belief, but its meaningfulness and strength that truly matters' in determining the beliefs onto which we cling, particularly in uncertain situations. Farias believes what is distinguishable about

modern Atheists is their *Gnostic* drive - their seeming deep drive for self-mastery or attempt to break with or transform biological nature - through knowledge acquisition and application. In his view, contemporary Atheists move towards autonomy as distinct from the rest of humanity, the individualistic need to feel in control, experience greater personal freedoms. They often embrace science in order to liberate from ignorance and provide deeper meaning.

For Ruse (2015, p. 6) belief in Atheism is both an intellectual and moral issue, contending Atheism as ‘not just a matter of the facts’ of whether or not God exists, but rather ‘whether morally we should believe in God or the gods’. For him, it is ‘an intensely moral issue’ in that ‘it is immoral to believe something without sufficient evidence’. If other Atheists share Ruse’s moral and intellectual impetus towards disbelief, it may inform Atheists’ negative perception of Christians. According to Guenther’s (2014) ethnographic and interview data from 15 participants, Atheists see religious believers as a group unlike themselves – from naïve, gullible and/or stupid to narrow-minded, tyrannical, and even evil, posing a social and/or political threat to education and society. The greatest levels of hostility towards religion and religious people was directed towards evangelical Christians and Mormons, particularly religious leaders and institutions than individual believers. Guenther’s chart demonstrates the social distance Atheists typically maintain with religious, particularly devout, believers. These boundaries become important in considering the perception of ‘the other’ due to the risk of developing unwarranted negative stereotypes and ready dismissal without authentic consideration or interaction. This chart has relevance to the research at hand due to the symbolic and moderate/wide social distance between Atheists and evangelical Christians along with the resulting unfamiliarity, unwarranted judgment, fear, and distancing which can and does occur – making personal and social connection as well as conversion less likely.

Figure 08. Guenther: Continuum of Social Distance between Atheists and Believers



This review regarding Atheist beliefs leads towards three critical points of consideration as related to this thesis. First, the literature strongly suggests an integration of influences, both substantive and functional, as shaping and motivating Atheists' discovery process towards nonbelief. This nuanced perspective is important for this study because, as Lanman proposes, Atheists and theists alike hold belief for more than explicit rational reflection. Multiple factors are at play in decision making. Streib and Klein (2018) agree with this broadened approach. They contend the study of Atheists and Atheism should identify motivations as well as varieties of belief and/or nonbelief. In their view, motives associated with the development of Atheism include intellectual doubts, personal experiences of disappointment or anger with religious professionals, communities, or God, as well as personal suffering, illness, loss, abuse, and/or trauma. If Atheism is conceived as multi-dimensional, formed and solidified through a variety of causes and motivations, then perhaps changing beliefs through conversion may also entail various interactive influences which should be considered.

Secondly, within the literature, authors do not reference the development of Atheist beliefs or worldview as much as speak of formation of an identity. Identity seems to hold primacy over belief or is the framework upon which beliefs are held. This deserves

⁷¹ GUENTHER, K. M. 2014. Bounded by Disbelief: How Atheists in the United States Differentiate themselves from Religious Believers. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 29, 1-12. Those respondents who had extensive contact with religious believers, had been personally rejected because of their Atheism drew stronger social boundaries between them than those who had limited contact or had not been personally rejected because of their Atheistic beliefs. Despite these boundaries, Atheists appreciated the positive aspects of religious belief in providing comfort, belonging, and a framework for living, but still define religious believers in mostly negative terms.

consideration as to whether identity forms beliefs, whether belief forms identity, if they are distinct, or whether they mutually influence the development of each other. Within the context of this thesis, identity and beliefs will be studied separately with discussion to follow as to their relationship.

Lastly, the issue of Atheist holding negative beliefs as tethered to religion or positive beliefs separate from religion is a critical consideration within this thesis. This is particularly important as related to investigation into the Atheist story – how the Atheist ‘sees’ and holds beliefs as autonomous from religion, how they perceive their own narrative in rejecting the religious narrative, and what larger story the Atheist rejects in converting to the Christian story. This issue leads to an investigation in the literature as to the content of the Atheist Conversion to Christianity.

4.3.3. Atheist Conversion to Christianity

In reviewing academic scholarship on religious conversion, what stands out is the lack of study on contemporary Atheist conversion in the West. Although recent authors have investigated conversion of Chinese Atheists to Christianity (Wong, 2006, Yang, 2006, 1999, 1998)⁷² few studies consider conversion of ‘Westernized’ ‘non-religious’ persons or Atheists to Christianity (Hunsberger and Altemeyer, 1997; Langston, Albanesi, and Facciani, 2018). Hunsberger and Altemeyer (1997, pp. 188-196) analyzed 24 university students who became ‘amazing believers’, ‘very strongly accepting the basic tenets of Christianity’ from a prior ‘very low Religious Emphasis’ status. Fear was the primary motivator towards Christian conversion for fifteen students due to their own serious personal problems. Almost all of these students were led to Christianity by their peers and/or if they thought God had answered

⁷² WONG, L. F. 2006. From Atheists to Evangelicals: The Christian Conversion Experiences of Mainland Chinese Intellectuals in the United States of America. *TEC Publications*, YANG, F. 1998. Chinese Conversion to Evangelical Christianity: The Importance of Social and Cultural Contexts. *Sociology of Religion*, 59, 237-257. Yang argues that ‘social and cultural changes in China in the process of coerced modernization are the most important factor for Chinese conversion to Christianity; identity reconstruction of immigrant Chinese in a pluralist modern society also contributes to Chinese conversion to evangelical Christianity; institutional factors are of secondary importance.’ YANG, F. 1999. *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities*. PhD, Penn State University, YANG, F. & TAMNEY, J. B. 2006. Exploring Mass Conversion to Christianity Among the Chinese: An Introduction. *Sociology of Religion*, 67, 125-129.

their prayers. The nine remaining converts were drawn to religion for various reasons (such as desire for happiness, fulfillment, social relationship, and compassionate nature). While this study touched upon potential reasons for conversion to Christianity, its application is limited within the context of this study due to its lack of clear identification of converts as Atheist versus merely non-religious.

Langston's (2019) recent study investigating conversion of Atheists to Christianity corresponds more closely to the demographic and narrative analysis goals within this research. They performed thematic analysis of 111 biographical narratives found on the internet of self-described Atheist conversions to Christianity, identifying ten major themes contributing towards conversion. The most commonly occurring theme is Ritual Behaviors (53%) (prayer, church attendance, Bible reading), followed closely by Intellectualism (50%) and Numinous Experiences (45%). Other motivating influences include Social Ties (44%), Hardship (39%), Unfamiliarity/Pseudo-familiarity with Christianity or Christians (33%), Openness to Experience (30%), Authentic Example (28%), Religious Study (25%), and Contra Atheism (24%). The authors concluded these factors are similar to those reported in conversion within or between religious traditions, that none of these factors were sufficient in isolation to cause conversion but an integration of influences was demonstrated. Although the number of variables is limited, they emphasized that an unlimited combination of factors is possible due to the diversity of unique conversion patterns available to each individual. Due to the high degree of variability and individuality in conversion, the authors resist any formulated staging or sequencing of conversion models. Their study also confirms the need for interdisciplinary conversion study due to combinations and interactions of factors, incorporating various domains of study in order to provide a broadened perspective.

In the context of this thesis, Langston's research demonstrates the integrated nature of religious conversion. Importantly, the narrative themes emerging in his inductive study reveal the positive presence of both Function and Substance variables, with Substance elements (Intellectualism and Numinous Experiences) as the second and third most prominent themes

among ten. This documented evidence reinforces warrant for more thorough investigation of both Function and Substance influences in religious conversion, particularly of self-identified Atheists to Christianity. Langston also recommends inclusion of interview and accompanying survey design, investigation of pre-conversion Atheistic period, attention to gender, as well as potential contextual social forces at play in the forming and changing of beliefs. These suggestions find application within study construction and analysis within this thesis.⁷³

4.4. Narrative in Context

For purposes of this thesis it is important to understand the divergent stories of both naturalistic Atheism and Christianity in order to fully appreciate biographical reconstruction and personal transformation as indicators of religious conversion. The following provides a background and lens through which to view pre-metanarrative, conversion, and post-metanarrative stories as elicited and analyzed in this thesis.

4.4.1. Naturalistic Atheist Narrative

Although the naturalistic Atheist can be understood as the ‘rejection identity’, the dismissal of a certain view of reality (disbelief in a supernatural reality) requires the affirmation of another (a naturalistic view of reality). It is within this context that positive statements regarding the nature of the universe and humanity are placed and the storyline is written. The metaphysical naturalistic Atheist holds to particular concepts that form the basis of their narrative.⁷⁴ Fales (2007, pp. 122-123) states, ‘naturalism is, fundamentally, just a commitment to a scientific worldview’ through which methodological naturalism restricts scientific investigation to natural phenomena. According to Sire’s (2004) worldview paradigm, naturalism entails: (1) Matter exists eternally and is all there is.⁷⁵ God does not exist. (2) The cosmos exists as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system. (3) Human beings are complex ‘machines’ indistinct from other elements in the physical reality

⁷³ Comparison of results of Langston’s study with the research at hand is located in Chapter 10, Section 10.2.6., pp. 353-354.

⁷⁴ These are ‘formal’ propositions regarding the worldview. Individual variations in beliefs are inevitable.

⁷⁵ Many naturalists (and theists) differ with this contention based upon pervasive evidence for the beginning of time, space, matter, and energy at the origin of the universe 13.7 billion years ago through big bang cosmology.

of the cosmos. (4) Death is extinction of personality and individuality. (5) Human rational faculties came from a blind, non-rational survival mechanism. (6) Ethics is related only to human beings, grounded in group-approved survival-promoting action. (7) History is a linear stream of events linked by cause and effect but without an overarching purpose.

Historically, Atheists have promoted a narrative version of their worldview. Bertrand Russell (1903) described the Atheist's worldview using symbol and imagery, personifying the blind, unthinking universe as birthing a sighted, knowledgeable humanity:

Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which Science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave;

that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy that rejects them can hope to stand...

How in such an alien and inhuman world, so powerless a creature as man preserve his aspirations untarnished? A strange mystery it is that nature, omnipotent but blind, in the revolutions of her secular hurrying through the abysses of space, has brought forth at last a child, subject still to her power, but gifted with sight, with knowledge of good and evil, with the capacity of judging all the works of his unthinking mother.

Twentieth century cosmologist Carl Sagan (1980, p. 4) encapsulated the Atheist story with his memorable statement, 'The cosmos is all that is, or ever was, and ever will be.' More recently, Richard Dawkins argues for an Atheistic worldview through an appeal to the natural sciences, particularly through evolutionary biology. Dawkins (2008, p. 35) speaks as himself as a 'deeply religious non-believer' in considering the awe-inspiring mysteries of the universe, telling the Atheist story in symbolic form:

Human thoughts and emotions emerge from exceedingly complex interconnections of physical entities within the brain. An Atheist in this sense of philosophical naturalist is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no supernatural creative intelligence lurking

behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles – except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don't yet understand.

If there is something that appears to lie beyond the natural world as it is now imperfectly understood, we hope eventually to understand it and embrace it within the natural. As ever when we unweave the rainbow, it will not become less wonderful.

Yet, hand-in-hand with Dawkins' extraordinary admiration for the cosmos, he also holds a stark view of the reality of the human and animal story within 'a Darwinian View of Life' (Dawkins, 1995, p. 133):

The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. It must be so...

In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. *The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.*

Contemporary philosophers also advance storied renditions of naturalistic Atheism.

McGrath (2006, p. 79) promotes a plot-driven redemptive narrative of Atheism rescuing humanity from the ignorance of religion:

[There is] a permanent, essential conflict between the natural sciences and religion. Science is at war with religion...Science proves things, whereas religion depends on the authoritarian imposition of its dogmas, which fly in the face of evidence. To take the idea of God seriously is to commit intellectual suicide. *Scientists are the Promethean liberators of humanity from their bondage to religious tradition and superstition.*

History also suggests those who are attracted to Atheism are first repelled against theism, against organized religion's excesses and failures. McGrath (2006, pp. 272, X) views modern Atheism as 'derivative, its attraction residing primarily in what it denies, rather than what it articulates as an alternative'. Here McGrath (2006, p. X) describes Atheism's redemptive story, freeing humanity from the oppression of religion:

[Atheism is] the explicit denial of all spiritual powers and supernatural beings, or the demand for the elimination of the transcendent as an illusion. For some,

it was felt, the mirage of religion might comfort. Christianity, after all, inculcated a soothing possibility of consolation in the face of life's sorrows. But increasingly it was argued that this illusion imprisoned, trapped, and deceived. By any index of its capacities, Christianity, like all religions, was held to be deficient. Intellectually, its central ideas were ridiculous and untenable; socially, it was reactionary and oppressive. The time had come to break free of its clutches, once and for all.

In sum, for McGrath (2006, p. 275), Atheism rejects religious ideas as inferior to or irreconcilable with 'the best moral standards and ideals of human culture', and affirms 'visions of a larger freedom, allowing humanity to throw aside its chains' of religious moral obligations, power, and privilege.

Similarly, Charles Taylor (2007) presents a teleological portrayal of Atheism's rise of humanity towards greater ends. Using Nietzsche's 'death of God' narrative as a basis, Taylor's (2007, pp. 570-571) characterizes the Atheist story as an:

upbeat story of the progress of triumphant scientific reason which cherishes the dominance of an empirical-scientific approach to knowledge claims, of individualism, negative freedom, instrumental rationality. But these come to the fore because they are what we humans 'normally' value, once we are no longer impeded or blinded by false or superstitious beliefs and the stultifying modes of life which accompany them...

[It is] a discovery within the frame of a newly constructed understanding of ourselves, our predicament, and our identity. The element of 'discovery' seems unchallengeable, because the underlying construction is pushed out of sight and forgotten.

The 'master narrative' story of Atheism is what Taylor (2007, pp. 572-573) calls 'the subtraction story' from belief in God to belief in humanity:

Once we slough off our concern with serving God, or attending to any other transcendent reality, what we're left with is human good, and that is what modern societies are concerned with.

Humankind is independent of God, morally superior, experiencing the world...

as autonomous beings who revel in choice, as citizens among others in a sovereign people, as potentially in control of history, within a great cultural change of new understandings of self, agency, time, and society which Western modernity has generated...

as mature, courageous, as a conquest over the temptations of childishness, dependency or lesser fortitude, requires that we remain aware of the vanquished enemy, of the obstacles which have to be climbed over, of the dangers which still await those whose brave self-responsibility falters.

Taylor (2007, pp. 573-574) summarizes the Atheist metanarrative with ‘four connected facets’:

- 1) The ‘death of God’ thesis that one can no longer honestly, lucidly, sincerely believe in God;
- 2) Some ‘subtraction story’ of the rise of modern humanism;
- 3) A view on the original reasons for religious belief, and on their place in perennial human motivations, which grounds the subtraction story;
- 4) Seeing modern secularization as mainly a recession of religion in the face of science, technology and rationality.

Taylor perceives the ‘death of God’ narrative as manifesting in two primary ways – the science-driven side towards materialism which depicts Atheists as ‘courageous adults who are ready to resist the comforting illusions of earlier metaphysical and religious beliefs in order to grasp the reality of an indifferent universe’; and, the moral side aimed towards getting rid of false illusions. Taylor (2007, p. 580) narrates the Atheist ‘moral storyline’:

Once human beings took their norms, their good, their standards of ultimate value from an authority outside of themselves: from God, or the gods, or the nature of Being or the cosmos. But then, they came to see that these higher authorities were their own fictions, and they realized that they had to establish their norms and values for themselves, on their own authority...

It is not just that freed from illusion, humans come to establish the true facts about the world [through science-driven materialism]. It is also that they come to dictate the ultimate values by which they live.

In his view (2007, 574-575), these ‘two faces’ of scientific materialism combined with autonomous moral authority compose a ‘powerful contemporary story’ that ‘functions as unchallenged axioms, rather than as unshakable arguments. They rely on very shaky assumptions and cultural mutations escaping examination in the climate in which they are taken as the undeniable framework for any argument’. For Taylor, the narrative dimension is extremely important because the force of the story comes less from argument and more from their narrative form, undermining the plausibility structures of faith. He states (2007, p. 590), Atheism ‘[relegates] all forms of religion to an earlier era...the original arguments on which this narrative rests cease to matter, so powerful is the sense created in certain milieu, that these old views just *can’t* be options for us’ in a modern Western context.

Although Taylor points to the ‘self-valorizing understanding of Atheism’ through its positive beliefs and storyline, he also demonstrates the powerful nature of the Atheist meta-narrative in rejecting religious superstition. Recalling narrative structure, stories require a beginning/stability, middle/de-stabilization/conflict, call to action/response, and end/re-stabilization/resolution. The meta-narrative of Atheism entails stability and growth, conflict and adversity with religion, followed by active defeat of the ‘old’ religious narrative and triumph of the new naturalistic, scientific and moral narrative. It increasingly becomes the unquestioned authoritative voice in the university and public square as religion continues to lose intellectual and moral plausibility.

In contrast, other contemporary Atheists discourage narrative as a way to represent naturalistic Atheism, preferring a more fact-based account. Rosenberg (2011, pp. 6-9), argues, ‘We need to disentangle ourselves from our love affair with stories as they never really convey any deep understanding of anything.’ He avoids the idea of story to depict the Atheist view because ‘religious stories’ are held to be false, and Atheism represents rationally, scientifically supported facts and data.⁷⁶ He states,

any facts that make any story true are found in equations, theories, models and laws...science shows the stories we tell one another to explain our own and other’s people’s action and to answer the persistent questions are all based on a series of illusion...Science provides all the significant truths about reality; and, knowing such truths is what real understanding is all about.’

Rosenberg’s factual answers to ‘life’s persistent questions’ paint a vivid picture of Atheism:

Is there a God? No.

What is the nature of reality? What physics says it is.

What is the purpose of the universe? There is none.

What is the meaning of life? There is none.

Why am I here? Luck.

Is there a soul? Is it immortal? No.

Is there free will? No.

What happens when we die? Everything goes on as before, except us.

⁷⁶ ROSENBERG, A. 2011. *The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions*, New York, NY, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. ‘Scientism’ is the ‘conviction that the methods of science are the only reliable ways to secure knowledge of anything; that science’s description of the world is correct in its fundamentals; and that when ‘complete,’ what science tells us will not be surprisingly different from what it tells us today.’

What is the difference between right and wrong? No moral difference.

Why should I be moral? It makes you feel better than being immoral.

Does history have any meaning or purpose? It signifies nothing.

Does the human past have lessons for our future? Fewer and fewer, if any.

Rather than rendering such a stark view, Stephen Law (2013) contends for the positive narrative of Atheist humanists as declaring freedom of thought and expression, support of an open, democratic society, encouraging children to think critically and independently on moral, religious, political, and other big questions, and advocates the application of science and reason. Ruse (2015, pp. 112-120) also provides a pragmatic version of the methodological science story: ‘Science is a machine, and the world is a mechanism; the components of life are chemicals in motion, and living organisms (humans, animals, plants, viruses) are reproducing, survival machines, and human brains are computers.’ However, he recognizes this story does not answer some questions such as ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’, ‘What is the meaning of it all?’, ‘What about the special nature of humans?’ (as including consciousness, self-awareness), and ‘What about obligations, morality?’ Despite naturalism’s inability to provide all of the answers, Ruse’s preference is Atheistic skepticism rather than adoption of theistic belief.⁷⁷ To the skeptic, he (2015, p. 245) also commends a positive narrative in spite of naturalism’s sobering reality:

If you become a nonbeliever, then you have left the security of your childhood. There is no ultimate meaning. And secular attempts to find a substitute, like relying on progress, simply aren’t going to do it. It’s gone forever. But don’t panic or despair.

There may be no objective morality and no ultimate meaning, but nature (meaning in today’s terms our psychology as molded through evolution by natural selection) has made us such that we can be kind and giving, enjoy life, and find it worthwhile.

Several issues arise within these naturalistic Atheistic meta-narratives that are worthy of consideration in researching the stories individual Atheists tell. First, how closely do

⁷⁷ RUSE, M. 2015. *Atheism: What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press. In McGrath’s book, *Atheism*, he recounts Thomas Huxley’s coining the term ‘agnostic’ in 1869 to designate someone who recognized the great questions of life lay beyond demonstration. In Huxley’s view, ‘it was impossible to arrive at any degree of metaphysical certainty in these matters, and the only moral response was declared the existence or nonexistence of God lay beyond true human knowledge.’ pp. 94-95.

personal Atheist stories follow the Atheist metanarrative? Do they connect with the larger themes of human progression and release from the ignorance and oppression of religion? Do they perceive themselves as sober-minded, moral, and courageous individuals willing to confront a stark reality? Are their stories more pragmatic and fact driven? Do they perceive themselves within a larger meta-narrative at all? Are their Atheistic beliefs presumed or have they been thoughtfully investigated? Secondly, regarding motivations for belief, which meta-narrative is most often told - scientific Atheism, humanistic Atheism, or something more personal? Using Taylor's terms, what 'face' of Atheism do they portray? Are they aware of the larger narratives of Atheism or of their own motivations? Are they more defined by negative or positive beliefs? Are they motivated against religion or for Atheism? Further, where, how, and why did they find themselves within the Atheistic story? How has their 'living out' of the Atheist narrative affected their lives in terms of perspective, meaning, purpose, values, experience, identity, belonging, and sense-making? These pertinent questions provide a basic framework upon which to build and analyze investigation of personal Atheist stories.

4.4.2. Christian Narrative

The Christian meta-narrative is told within biblical/canonical narratives, the ecclesial/community narratives, as well as personal and conversion narratives. Basic Christian theism holds to particular presuppositions of reality informing its larger story. Per Sire (2004), classical Christianity asserts: (1) God exists and is infinite and personal (triune), transcendent and immanent, omniscient, sovereign and good. (2) God created the cosmos *ex nihilo* to operate with a uniformity of cause and effect in an open system. (3) Human beings are created in the image of God and thus possess personality, self-transcendence, intelligence, morality, gregariousness and creativity. (4) Human beings can know both the world around them and God himself because God has built into them the capacity to do so and because he takes an active role in communicating with them. (5) Human beings were created good, but through the Fall the image of God became defaced, though not so ruined as not to be capable

of restoration; through the work of Christ, God redeemed humanity and began the process of restoring people to goodness, though any given person may choose to reject that redemption.

(6) For each person death is either a gate to life with God and his people or the gate to eternal separation from the only thing that will ultimately fulfill human aspirations. (7)

Ethics is transcendent and is based on the character of God as good, holy, and loving. (8)

History is linear, a meaningful sequence of events leading to the fulfillment of God's purposes for humanity. Through the following sections, this basic storyline will be presented as communicated through religious text, religious community, and personal appropriation and expression.

4.4.2.1. Biblical / Canonical Narrative

Christianity's propositions of belief are grounded within the biblical text and given narrative form. As described by Newbigin (1999, p. 4), the Judeo-Christian story is an overarching narrative, an 'interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole creation and the history of the human race. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it'.⁷⁸ The historical Christian narrative does not begin with the story of Christianity beginning in first century Judaism; rather, the Christian narrative begins with its origins from and even prior to the beginning of time in the person and creative work of God. Goldberg (2001, p. 153) affirms the broad historical scope of the bible, stating, 'The Biblical narrative unfolds not merely biblical history but essentially all history'. According to Stonestreet and Kunkle (2017, p. 50), the Bible is 'fundamentally a narrative telling the story of the world from the creation to its new creation' containing story structure as typical of narrative, including an introduction, a protagonist, antagonists, conflict, and resolution. Newbigin (1999, pp. 5-6) describes the structure and symbolic nature of the biblical story:

⁷⁸ NEWBIGIN, L. 1999. *A Walk through the Bible*, Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox. This quote was taken from Newbigin's conversation with a Hindu scholar who was comparing the religious narrative of the bible with other religious texts that do not possess such a comprehensive view.

Every good story has a hero or heroine. The Bible has a hero and that hero is God, because the Bible interprets the whole of reality and the whole of history in terms of the actions, the doings, the speakings, the promises of God. And therefore, the Bible is the way in which we come to know God, because we don't know a person except by knowing his or her story.

The Bible tells the story of the whole human race in terms of a particular story of one race – that of Israel – and of one person within that race – Jesus of Nazareth...The story of all the nations is the background of the biblical story, but it is not at the centre. The story is told from the point of view of people whom God chose to be the bearers of his purpose...

To be those chosen people, to be the place where God is made known in history, is to be chosen for suffering, for agony, for conflict – and that is the story that the Bible tells.

The biblical meta-narrative sets itself apart from some other religious texts in its claims to be grounded in historical events rather than purely fictive, mythological, or ideational. For Osborne (2005, p. 673), in order for biblical narrative to be considered historical, 'there are two levels of truth to consider: the correspondence of the event or speech to what happened and the correspondence of the theological message to the rest of Scripture'.⁷⁹ Although this is not place to justify the credibility or reliability of the biblical text as corresponding with reality, it is important to appreciate that many who believe the biblical narrative take it to be theologically and historically true to events, places, and people in the text, unless qualified in context as to its literary genre (such as poetry, prophecy, parables, or wisdom). Although the bible is comprised of sixty-six books of varying genre (history, poetry, prophecy, biography, and eschatology), composed over a 1400-year period, its narrative has a cohesive understanding of reality, a unifying theme, and a comprehensive, progressive story line from beginning to end. Christianity entails belief in the 'meta-

⁷⁹ OSBORNE, G. R. 2005. Historical Narrative and Truth in the Bible. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 48, 673-688. Osborne provides an overview of the approach to historical narrative: 'In the nineteenth century, historians abandoned the traditional narrative style of historiography which centered on individuals and events and turned to an environmental and social mode of study that they believed could better answer *why* history unfolded as it did. Thus, social science methodology triumphed, and societal forces and material conditions were the focus of research. A deterministic model took over, and a hierarchy of interests developed, with the first tier being economic and demographic evidence, the second tier being social structure, and the third (almost forgotten) tier being the intellectual, religious, and cultural element. The result was revisionist history with a vengeance. A new skepticism toward the biblical narrative resulted, and radical scholars such as P. R. Davies and N. P. Lemche could say confidently that biblical Israel is only a literary creation and has almost no resemblance to Iron Age Israel. However, this bias is beginning to dissipate, and a recent interest (from the 1970s) in narrative approaches has reemerged, partly due to weaknesses in the deterministic model and partly due to the realization that ideas and customs provide an important supplement to material evidence.'

narrative’ of an eternally existent triune God (Father, Son, Spirit – one essence/nature, three persons) who created and sustains the universe and humanity with a *telos* in mind, beginning with ancient Israel (as documented in the Old Testament narratives) through first century Palestine in the lives of Jesus of Nazareth, the apostles, and the early church to current and future people and events (in the New Testament narratives).

Several themes arise in the bible reinforcing the meta-narrative and teleological nature of the Judeo-Christian story. Fackre (1996) summarizes the biblical narrative through seven themes: Creation (by God of the universe and humanity), Fall (of humanity and resulting consequences), Covenant (of God with humanity through Israel), Jesus Christ (God incarnate as the center of human history and through which understanding of the whole narrative is given perspective, followed by Church, Salvation, and Consummation. The main point, per Fackre, is that Christianity, when viewed in the context of literary form – story in its delimited sense – has features of tension and vision, pain and hope, movement and consummation. From a psychological perspective, Vitz (2001, pp. 161-165) contends Christianity is based upon a historical narrative with ‘deep ironic understandings about human nature’ including the nature of human depravity, pride, and doubt. For him, Christianity is tragedy ending in joy as the dominant narrative principle.

In order to provide samples of the Christian meta-narrative, three passages in the bible were identified as encapsulating the biblical story of God from the New Testament⁸⁰: The first text is located in Acts 17:22-34 whereby the apostle Paul (~63-70 C.E.) is speaking to philosophers and scholars at the Areopagus forum in Greece, telling of God’s creative origin and purposes of the universe as well as God’s relationship to and redemption of humanity:

²² So Paul, standing before them at the Mars Hill forum, addressed them as follows:

‘Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious,’ ²³ for as I was out walking, I saw your many altars, and one of them had this inscription on it: ‘To the Unknown God.’ You have been worshipping him without knowing who he is, and now I wish to tell you about him.

⁸⁰ New Testament, Living Bible (TLB)

²⁴ ‘He made the world and everything in it, and since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples; ²⁵ and human hands can’t minister to his needs—for he has no needs! He himself gives life and breath to everything and satisfies every need there is. ²⁶ He created all the people of the world from one man, Adam, and scattered the nations across the face of the earth. He decided beforehand which should rise and fall, and when. He determined their boundaries.

²⁷ ‘His purpose in all of this is that they should seek after God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ For in him we live and move and are! As one of your own poets says it, ‘We are the sons of God.’ ²⁹ If this is true, we shouldn’t think of God as an idol made by men from gold or silver or chipped from stone. ³⁰ God tolerated man’s past ignorance about these things, but now he commands everyone to put away idols and worship only him. ³¹ For he has set a day for justly judging the world by the man he has appointed and has pointed him out by bringing him back to life again.’

³² When they heard Paul speak of the resurrection of a person who had been dead, some laughed, but others said, ‘We want to hear more about this later.’ ³³ That ended Paul’s discussion with them, ³⁴ but a few joined him and became believers.

In the second text, Acts 13:16-39, the apostle Paul is speaking to Jews and Gentiles on the Sabbath in the Pisidian Antioch synagogue, recounting the historical ‘story of God’ from the time of the nation of Israel (~1200-1000 B.C.E.) up to first century events, recounting fulfilled prophecy, death, burial, resurrection, and redemptive purposes of Jesus Christ recorded in 63-70 C.E.:

⁶ So Paul stood, waved a greeting to them and began. ‘Men of Israel,’ he said, ‘and all others here who reverence God, let me begin my remarks with a bit of history.

¹⁷ ‘The God of this nation Israel chose our ancestors and honored them in Egypt by gloriously leading them out of their slavery. ¹⁸ And he nursed them through forty years of wandering around in the wilderness. ¹⁹⁻²⁰ Then he destroyed seven nations in Canaan and gave Israel their land as an inheritance. Judges ruled for about four hundred and fifty years and were followed by Samuel the prophet. ²¹ Then the people begged for a king, and God gave them Saul (son of Kish), a man of the tribe of Benjamin, who reigned for forty years. ²² But God removed him and replaced him with David as king, a man about whom God said, ‘David (son of Jesse) is a man after my own heart, for he will obey me.’ ²³ And it is one of King David’s descendants, Jesus, who is God’s promised Savior of Israel!

²⁴ ‘But before he came, John the Baptist preached the need for everyone in Israel to turn from sin to God. ²⁵ As John was finishing his work he asked, ‘Do you think I am the Messiah? No! But he is coming soon—and in comparison with him, I am utterly worthless.’ ²⁶ ‘Brothers—you sons of Abraham, and also all of you Gentiles here who reverence God—this salvation is for all of us!

²⁷ The Jews in Jerusalem and their leaders fulfilled prophecy by killing Jesus; for they didn’t recognize him or realize that he is the one the prophets had written about, though they heard the prophets’ words read every Sabbath. ²⁸ They found no just cause to execute him, but asked Pilate to have him killed anyway. ²⁹ When they

had fulfilled all the prophecies concerning his death, he was taken from the cross and placed in a tomb.³⁰ 'But God brought him back to life again!³¹ And he was seen many times during the next few days by the men who had accompanied him to Jerusalem from Galilee—these men have constantly testified to this in public witness.

³²⁻³³ 'And now Barnabas and I are here to bring you this Good News—that God's promise to our ancestors has come true in our own time, in that God brought Jesus back to life again. This is what the second Psalm is talking about when it says concerning Jesus, 'Today I have honored you as my Son.'³⁴ 'For God had promised to bring him back to life again, no more to die. This is stated in the Scripture that says, 'I will do for you the wonderful thing I promised David.'³⁵ In another Psalm he explained more fully, saying, 'God will not let his Holy One decay.'³⁶ This was not a reference to David, for after David had served his generation according to the will of God, he died and was buried, and his body decayed.³⁷ No, it was a reference to another—someone God brought back to life, whose body was not touched at all by the ravages of death.

³⁸ 'Brothers! Listen! In this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins!³⁹ Everyone who trusts in him is freed from all guilt and declared righteous—something the Jewish law could never do.

Thirdly, John 1:1-14 (~ 90-95 C.E.) is a more theological narrative as told by the author in the gospel of John, describing the account of Jesus Christ as one member of the triune God, eternally existent, who entered into time and space in first century Judea, becoming human in order for humanity to know God and become 'children of God'. This narrative demonstrates not only a historical recounting but also vivid symbolism (e.g., life/light of God as contrasted with darkness of the world; intentional, fatherly love of God and the ability to become His child through believing who He is and receiving the offer of adoption). The author writes:

¹⁻² Before anything else existed, there was Christ, with God. He has always been alive and is himself God.³ He created everything there is—nothing exists that he didn't make.⁴ Eternal life is in him, and this life gives light to all mankind.⁵ His life is the light that shines through the darkness—and the darkness can never extinguish it.

⁶⁻⁷ God sent John the Baptist as a witness to the fact that Jesus Christ is the true Light.⁸ John himself was not the Light; he was only a witness to identify it.⁹ Later on, the one who is the true Light arrived to shine on everyone coming into the world.

¹⁰ But although he made the world, the world didn't recognize him when he came.¹¹⁻¹² Even in his own land and among his own people, the Jews, he was not accepted. Only a few would welcome and receive him. But to all who received him, he gave the right to become children of God. All they needed to do was to trust him to save them.¹³ All those who believe this are reborn! --not a physical rebirth resulting from human passion or plan—but from the will of God.

¹⁴ And Christ became a human being and lived here on earth among us and was full of loving forgiveness and truth. And some of us have seen his glory—the glory of the only Son of the heavenly Father!

Once converts believe in God through Jesus Christ, they begin to ‘see themselves in the text’, embodying the story – as in this passage, becoming ‘children of God’. Fackre (1996, pp. 29-30) confirms, ‘The truth conveyed is inseparable from the story form in which it comes to us, each story embodying the character of biblical faith. We are found by that faith as we engage its narrative form’.

4.4.2.2. Ecclesial / Community Narrative

The biblical meta-narrative forms and informs the religious communities who adopt and communicate it. In turn, those community stories shape individual lives and personal narratives. Within classical Christian tradition, community stories are drawn from the biblical text and preserved in creedal⁸¹, doctrinal, and sacramental traditions (such as liturgy, baptism, and communion). Per Fackre (1996, pp. 29-32), the Christian community gathers the particulars from the bible’s overarching plot and ‘finds a place for the experiences of life story’ within its historic faith. However, he cautions that truth claims cannot be separated from the story, clarifying, ‘As narrative it cannot succumb to a heartless propositionalism, but as theology, it cannot fall prey to mindless imaginationism’. Beyond the meta-narrative of scripture, Goldberg (2001, p. 156) maintains that there are many types of narrative and much

⁸¹ Apostles Creed (~390 C.E.): I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Nicene Creed (originally adopted by the First Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E.): We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into existence, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down from the heavens, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge living and dead, of Whose kingdom there will be no end; And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is together worshipped and together glorified, Who spoke through the prophets; in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism to the remission of sins; we look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Early church creed – I Corinthians 15:3-5 (received by the apostle Paul approximately 3-5 years post-resurrection of Christ; written by Paul in a letter to the church in Corinth, Greece dated approximately 54-55 C.E.): ‘For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.’ (NASB)

story content within the master narrative of the bible. The smaller and larger narratives within the bible are evaluated in terms of structure and form, content, and ethic. Biblical stories tell us about the nature of God, ourselves, the world, and the relationships between us.

The Christian evangelical community narrative has particularities which differentiates itself from the broader community of Christianity. Fackre (2001) characterizes ‘evangelical’ as those who espouse the authority of Scripture and justification by grace through faith; Scripture is interpreted as inerrant and infallible with moral mandate toward personal living; and, evangelicals have a sense of urgency about sharing their good news of salvation through Jesus. He identifies specific characteristics of the evangelical narrative as including immersion in biblical stories, an emphasis on the individual conversion story and/or continuing relationship with Jesus, and the recognition of the personal story as finding its place within the larger plot of ‘God’s story’.

4.4.2.3. Christian Conversion Narrative

As this research seeks to study Atheist converts to Christianity, it is relevant to consider narrative within a personal conversion context. Kling (2014, pp. 605-607) sees conversion as ‘a dynamic, multifaceted movement from something to something’, a pattern of ‘forsaking, embracing, and incorporation’. Christian conversion accounts are patterned similarly to basic narrative plot structure, beginning, middle and end, from ‘one who is’ (pre-conversion state without a personal relationship with God) to ‘one who becomes’ (conversion and reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ). For Kling (2014), the language of Christian conversion reflects the biblical New Testament Greek terms *epistrephein* – to turn back, to return to the source of the way of the life, *metanoia* – to think again, to change mentality, to repent, and/or *conversio* – a turning over. Conversion language symbolizes radical change of perspective or transformation in one’s outlook (such as ‘new life’, ‘new creation’, and ‘born again’, ‘a turning, allegiance, or commitment to Christ in whom salvation is promised’). Peace (2004, p. 9) clarifies that conversion not only requires *metanoia* (repentance) but must be combined with *pistis* (faith) in order to bring about

epistrophe (turning). In his view, Christian conversion is characterized by:

a decision (repentance) based on understanding (awareness, consciousness, conviction) to turn around from a life of sin (darkness, disobedience, waywardness) to the way of Jesus (light, God, holiness), with a resultant new way of living in the context of the kingdom of God. In theological terms, conversion is the human experience of salvation (vs. the inner reality of regeneration, which is the hidden work of God).

More than individual benefit, conversion narratives tie individuals to their new religious community through acquiring its rhetoric. For Hindmarsh (2014, p. 357), conversion narrative functions to help ‘cement a convert into his/her new community by taking on the language and appropriating the narrative of that community’ Kling (2014) maintains that the words, metaphors, and images used are often inherited discourse from mainline Protestant tradition and/or the evangelical subculture (such as ‘personal relationship with God’, ‘now ready to meet God’). More than mere belief in formal doctrine or belonging to a community, ‘true belief’ and ‘real conversion’ reflects the language of Christian conversion (Kling, 2014, pp. 605-607).⁸²

Further, scholars recognize variations between mainline and evangelical forms of conversion. Peace (2004, pp. 8-13) describes differences in ‘socialization’ tradition of Mainline Protestants and the ‘decisionist’ tradition of Evangelicals. For Mainline Protestants, Christian conversion is often a process of socialization over time, ‘a matter more of nurture than decision’, of baptism, school instruction, catechism and confirmation, as well as active participation in church. Regarding self-identification as a Christian, a mainline Protestant context people may be uncomfortable speaking about ‘becoming a Christian’. Rather, it is more natural to talk about ‘being a Christian’. Peace (2004, p. 13) states:

I find that mainline churches generally display a curious reluctance to talk about conversion at all. It is almost as if members believed that the word itself has been co-opted by other theological traditions and thus is not to be used because it connotes something with which we are uncomfortable.

⁸² Kling cites William Barclay’s understanding of ‘real conversion of turning to God in Christ’: ‘In real conversion a man is turned around and left permanently facing God. For him the presence of the risen Christ is the very atmosphere of life. He is as much in Christ, in Paul’s great phrase, as he is in the air which surrounds him and which gives him the breath of life...In real conversion life is no longer an oscillation, but a state in which life is permanently turned towards God.’ (William Barclay, *Turning to God: A Study of Conversion in the Book of Acts and Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 28.

‘Conversion’ may be viewed as a power word, with those who use it seeking domination over others, defining for others what their experience must be. In addition, in mainline churches there is a kind of delicacy to inquiring about conversion, almost as if to raise the question is to suggest that some might be converted and others not.

Alternatively, for Evangelicals, conversion through personal decision is central as the defining emphasis, both in self-identity and practice. Peace describes Evangelical conversion as an individual experience (in a moment or over a period of time) through which a person believes certain doctrines (e.g., Jesus is God and Savior) and trusts in Jesus for forgiveness of sins (because He satisfied the judgment of God on the cross) and to provide reconciliation with God and a source of life now and in eternity. Regarding its form, Sremac (2010, p. 19) claims evangelical conversion ‘has at its heart a narrative imperative’. In early modern England Puritan movement, Hindmarsh (2005, pp. 31-32) found this assertion to be historically true. Thousands of men and women who experienced evangelical conversion moved towards a ‘certain kind of spiritual autobiography’ to make sense of their experience providing the convert with a sense of narrative identity.⁸³ He states (p. 38), ‘if a believer could discern these stages in her life, correlating outward and inward experience, then she would possess a well-ordered and integrated sense of herself – who she was, where she had come from, and where she was going’. Within this context, the personal conversion narrative is both ecclesiastical (with external rites, rituals, and rhetoric) as well as individual (with inner personal regeneration of heart, mind, and soul by divine grace). He describes it as a hybrid or transitional genre: part self-examination and confession, part biblical exposition, part sermon exhortation, and part factual narrative. These conversion accounts typically followed a chronological pattern: Childhood religion was followed by a period of worldliness

⁸³ HINDMARSH, B. 2005. *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative - Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England*, Oxford, England, Oxford University Press. Hindmarsh provides historical survey of the development of the evangelical conversion narrative: ‘In short, the Renaissance made people more aware of themselves as individuals, and the church made them more aware of themselves as sinners. These two conditions were necessary for the emergence of evangelical conversion narrative as a popular genre. With the fracturing of Christendom in the confessional strife of the Reformation the question of allegiance to true church and true faith became acute. In this apologetic situation there appeared a new narrative of conversion based upon the teaching of the Reformers, one which emphasized the beginning of the Christian life in an individual’s first experience of repentance and faith, in contrast to the monastic and mystical preoccupations of medieval spiritual autobiography’ (p. 32).

and hardness of heart. After an awakening of religious conscience, a period of vainly attempted moral rectitude ended in self-despair. This brokenness brought about repentance, forgiveness of sins through the free gift of justification in Christ, and a psychological release from guilt. The new state of freedom and reconciliation with God prompted gratitude to God for His undeserved mercy and extended grace, resulting in a joyful life of service to God. This pattern appeared with consistency and a generic model of the conversion narrative was established. Through this development, conversion came to be seen as more than a moment in an individual's life, but as key to interpreting the meaning of life from beginning to end.

Gooren (2010a, pp. 95-96) agrees that the 17th century Puritan conversion is the 'stern forerunner of the contemporary individualized conversion concept in evangelical and Pentecostal churches' as traced back to the Second Awakening in the United States. He maintains contemporary evangelical conversion narratives contain standardized elements, including repentance and accepting Jesus Christ as personal Savior followed by water baptism by full immersion and are typically formulized as 'I was living in sin, but now I'm saved; I was lost, but now I'm found'. He summarizes (pp. 93-94), most conversion narratives are variations on the theme, 'You have to go through hell in order to get to heaven'. He also affirms Christian conversion narratives as strongly influenced by the apostle Paul's dramatic conversion on the Damascus road, an encounter with God causing immediate surrender which globally shaped and legitimized conversion.

More recently, an increased emphasis on the personal, inner nature of evangelical conversion in the contemporary West fostered the potential for conversion apart from community. A popular form of personal conversion narrative emerged within 'the autobiographical turn' with the rise of heightened self-determination, introspection, and individuality. According to Hindmarsh (2005, pp. 342-345), 'In the modern context, authoring an autobiography has become quite literally self-authorization. The 'we-narrative' of converts in early medieval Europe...has become the secular 'I-narrative' of modernity'. With evangelicals adapting to the consumer culture, the gospel has been viewed as a

commodity in the religious marketplace. Combined with ‘a strong countervailing emphasis upon the community of faith’, commodification has led to an evangelical conversion narrative promoting uniqueness and individualism. Markham (2007) also acknowledges contemporary growth of an internal privatized spirituality and a diminishing connection with external life of religious groups, institutions, traditions, practices, and moral codes.⁸⁴ Within the evangelical context, conversion is a deeply personal, internal occurrence. He states (p. 9), ‘For many evangelicals, conversion is primarily presumed to occur instantaneously as God responds to prayerful petition. Conversion is understood as receiving Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, characterized as a ‘personal relationship with God’, a change that occurs within the soul’. Deep conversion of the soul continues as converts embody and tell of their new understanding of reality, living ‘story-shaped lives’. In sum (p. 210), ‘The telling of the story of Jesus actively rewrites the personal narrative of every Christian – our lives and all of the experiences therein are interpreted through what God has done and is doing in the world’.

G.T. Smith (2011) concurs that prevalent evangelical understanding of conversion as an individual experience is separated from external religious groups and institutions. In his view, conversion was isolated from the experience of the church. It was generally assumed that a person would come to faith outside of the church and then be encouraged, after conversion, to join a church community. Until recent generations, evangelicals approached evangelism through the use of techniques or formulas by which a person would be introduced to spiritual truths on the assumption that if these principles were accepted as true, a person would offer an appropriate prayer and thus ‘become a Christian’. If someone acknowledged his position as a sinner, separated from God, was repentant and acknowledged their need for and acceptance of Jesus’ atonement on their behalf, they ‘received Christ’, were ‘saved’, and

⁸⁴ MARKHAM, P. N. 2007. *Rewired: Exploring Religious Conversion*. PhD Philosophical Theology, Fuller Seminary. Markham highlights the Westernized ‘heightened sense of self’ developed out of modernity with the ‘most salient features of selfhood in the West’ as the ‘notion of inwardness’ (i.e., mental states, emotions, feelings within us) that relates to an individualized, privatized spirituality and the inner life of the soul and spirit. He juxtaposes this notion of spirituality with the external Westernized conception of ‘religion’ as the ‘outer life’ of religious groups as institutions, traditions, practices, doctrines and moral codes (pp. 3-4).

could be confident of their eternity with God. However, Smith (2011, p. 3) maintains that the evangelical understanding of conversion has been undergoing a paradigm shift, with a ‘thorough-going re-envisioning of the nature of conversion and redemption’. Rather than a simple, single event in time, conversion is increasingly viewed as

a complex experience by which a person is initiated into a common life with the people of God who together seek the in-breaking of the kingdom, both in this life and in the world to come. This experience is mediated by the church and thus necessarily includes baptism as a rite of initiation.

The power or energy of this experience is one of immediate encounter with the risen Christ—rather than principles or laws—and this experience is choreographed by the Spirit rather than evangelistic techniques. Evangelicals are re-appropriating the heritage of the Reformation with its emphasis on the means of grace, and thereby affirming the priority of the Spirit's work in religious experience.

In this more comprehensive view, conversion appreciates more fully the broader context into which the personal conversion stories are placed. Spiritually, Smith contends Evangelicals are developing a greater appreciation for conversion as the sole work of God as choreographed by God alone with the convert responding to the initiative of God rather than God responding to ‘the sinner’s prayer’. Following conversion, immersion in the ‘life of the Spirit’ is given increasing emphasis within evangelicalism with expectation towards transformation. In Smith’s (2011, p. 12) view, ‘From the start, evangelism should engage the mind, connect the heart (to truth), and call forth the engagement of the will. In this way, it leads naturally to a process of spiritual formation and maturity. A convert joins a community that is growing up in Christ’.

Further, conversion is seen as a lifelong transformation in itself but is also a part of the sweeping history of God’s kingdom which has both past and future in view. Personal conversion is placed within the larger global community of faith across theological traditions as instituted and purposed by God, incorporating both ‘corporate and cosmic dimensions’; and, which has social, economic and ecological implications towards ‘a people in mission’ and active, living embodiment of God’s kingdom within particular social and cultural contexts. Smith (2011, p. 215) states, ‘Evangelicals are increasingly insistent that conversion

is not ultimately to the church but to Christ and his kingdom... Mission is not about selling people on the Christian religion so they will join the club; rather, it is about the kingdom and Christ's call to the nations to recognize the in-breaking of his reign'. The role of the church within conversion is also being given a greater place within the conversion process. Rather than merely a community joined after conversion, as an end, the church is now being appreciated as a means by which God is bringing people, communities and nations to faith in Christ, mediating the experience of conversion and the salvation of God through the Holy Spirit. As opposed to G.T. Smith who appreciates a more individualized conversion, Smith contends that conversion is more commonly being seen as a process of first belonging to a church community before one believes rather than a place of joining after belief. He affirms incorporation into the church as an essential element of conversion as the very means by which one comes to faith in Christ. It is not that one comes to Christ and then joins the church but that one comes to Christ through the embodied witness of the church by first belonging and then coming to believe.⁸⁵ Stout's research of evangelical conversion stories confirms Smith's paradigm of gradual conversion and transformation. Stout (2013) interviewed eleven 'born again' Christians and gathered their conversion narratives within an evangelical church in London, England to examine their religious experiences and conversion processes. The prominent theme among the converts was a gradual developing journey towards Christian faith with slow embodiment of the Holy Spirit as guiding their lives. The converts actively sought and considered Christianity prior to commitment; and, most understood conversion as requiring a personal relationship with God as their ultimate concern, the centre of their life' leading to a greater sense of meaning and trust in God's control of their lives.

⁸⁵ SMITH, G. T. 2011a. Conversion and Redemption. In: MCDERMOTT, G. R. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*. Oxford Handbooks Online: Oxford University Press. Smith continues, 'One belongs in order to learn the language of faith. The enquirer joins a community that worships the Triune God and, over time, comes to recognize the presence of the One who is the focus of attention for the faith community. Then also, the seeker is a learner who joins a community of learners, who then in turn allow their learning to shape and empower them for mission in the world. The enquirer is both an observer and participant, entering into the mission of God while in a process of coming to know who this God is who has reached out in Christ and who is at work in the human heart through the gracious presence of the Spirit.' (pp. 8-9, 216)

Overall, the personal conversion narrative of many Christians throughout history is reflected in the overarching structure of the biblical story. Hindmarsh (2005, p. 345) states, ‘Their personal stories replicate the biblical story in miniature and often take the form of an episode in the larger story of God. Their narratives have the same shape as the larger drama of salvation history’. Jindra, et. al. (2012, p. 3, 16, 19) studied Christian conversion narratives in fifty-nine college aged students. In her research, they presumed ‘all Christian conversion narratives will tap into the biblical meta-narrative structure (creation, fall, redemption) and will appear more similar than different regardless of individual differences that may exist between the converted.’ They recognized the linear conversion narrative styles among the testimonies in their ‘pointing towards the power of the overarching Christian story-line’. Based upon their findings, they recommended future research towards studying the ways, extent, and reasons converts incorporate elements of the overarching Christian narrative into conversion testimonies.

The power and multi-dimensionality of narrative from personal and individual to overarching metanarrative is rich and deep in complexity, relationship, and influence in the lives of religious converts throughout history.⁸⁶ Within this broadened appreciation, this thesis turns to address the challenges of research theory and method.

⁸⁶ A brief historical review also demonstrates the important roles Substance and Function influences play in religious conversion: Jews and Gentiles first converted to Christianity in the first century C.E. on the witness of Jesus Christ himself, on the testimony of eye witnesses of Jesus’s claims, death, burial, resurrection and appearances [experiential, evidential/ intellectual sense-making], and as prompted by the Holy Spirit’s presence [spiritual] at first Pentecost feast in Jerusalem 50 days after Jesus’ resurrection.

The early church grew despite Roman oppression, great persecution and martyrdom [historical, experiential]. Converts believed Jesus Christ was the Son of God, one with God the Father and God the Spirit, who came to earth as a man to save them from their sins, restore them to spiritual wholeness, and reconcile them to God [intellectual, spiritual]. Just as Jesus gave His life for them, they gave their lives in return out of gratitude for the grace and mercy extended them [experiential, meaning-making and purpose]. They believed [intellectual, spiritual] in the eternal truth of an eternal, creator God who came to earth and demonstrated His love for them by His sacrifice on the cross which purchased their salvation. They lived [experiential] as if it was true, as if Jesus Christ was real, part of the Godhead, eternally existent.

Christians in the first century often identified themselves [functional identity, spiritual] in culture with the symbol of the *ichthus*, a fish with the Greek expression meaning Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. Two thousand years later, conversion to Christianity remains prevalent. Converts continue to believe the same historical and spiritual claims as the early Christians [intellectual sense-making]. They are convinced of its truth to the extent that more Christians have died of martyrdom in the 20th century than all of the prior centuries combined [experiential, spiritual, meaning and purpose]. Willing to die for their beliefs, contemporary Christians converts remain steadfast in their allegiance to the truth of the gospel and to the person who revealed himself as the Truth, Jesus Christ.

PART TWO: THEORY, METHODOLOGY, AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.0. RESEARCH THEORY and METHODOLOGY

5.1. Introduction

Section Two of the thesis addresses the theory, method, and findings of research. Chapter five reviews theoretical approaches of social constructionism and critical realism in the contexts of knowledge, narrative, and research. Methodology for quantitative and qualitative research is presented, including study participant criteria, selection and relevant methodological limitations as well as data collection protocols, and data analysis programs. Ethical responsibility as well as study reliability and validity are reviewed. Chapters six through nine present mixed-method quantitative and qualitative study findings, including narrative analysis of a sample group of twenty-three converts' conversion stories.

5.2. Theoretical Approach to Conversion Research

The direction of research method and analysis depends upon the underlying theoretical approach. Within the social sciences, theoretical differences informing conversion research have been debated. According to Riessman (2008), the field of narrative studies has many layered realist, postmodern, and constructionist strands and scholarly disagreement on ways to conduct analysis. With the post-modern narrative turn, human sciences moved away from realist assumptions towards interpretive co-constructions of narrative and meaning, narrator and investigator, all part of the field of study. The first section of this chapter considers theories of social constructionism and critical realism as well as their potential application to research within the context of this study. This thesis seeks to find balance and integration between social constructionism and a modest epistemological view of critical realism in order to allow room for the full emic perspective as well as support a comprehensive understanding of conversion.

5.2.1. Theory, Social Constructionism, and Critical Realism

A goal of this research is to understand religious conversion from the converts' perspectives. Implicit within religious conversion is at least a tacit, if not deep, belief of the

convert in the truth of the religion to which he or she is converting. The selected population in this study, former Atheist converts to Christianity, contend Atheist and Christian worldviews are based upon knowable, objective truth. Jindra (2012, p. 18) recognized an emphasis on ‘true belief’ in the language of Christian conversion, stating, ‘Religious conversion interrelates with dogma, and for evangelical Christian, absolute truth. The nature of religious beliefs may produce a tendency for speakers to use rhetorical communication to reinforce the absolute nature of their beliefs.’ Dufault-Hunter (2012, p. 100) reminds the researcher of converts’ personal convictions regarding perceived truth, but also its pervasive, integrated effect on their lives:

Convicted of the truth of their story of faith, converts speak it as dogma or testimony, enact it in habits, rituals, moral choices, and embody it in their affections, spiritual encounters, and altered sensibilities. Pull on one thread of religious life and see how interwoven it is with others.

Through survey and interview, participants answer questions about their life history, perceptions, experiences, beliefs, motivations, and influences. Jindra (2014, pp. 334-335) considers a central question in religious conversion study is whether conversion narratives can be seen as accurate representations of what happened in someone’s life or whether they are pure reconstructions of one’s biography based on the new group membership. She recommends conversion research be expanded beyond mere sociological reconstructions which, in her view, produce accounts which are ‘too simplistic’, ‘artificially create coherence’ and are not necessarily indicative of ‘what really happened’. Instead, she advocates for critical realism in the study of religious conversion along with social construction.⁸⁷ Emmons & Paloutzian (2003, p. 395) also advocate critical realism in providing a more comprehensive approach for studying religious [conversion] than social constructionism alone can offer. They assert, ‘a new concept is needed to guide the

⁸⁷JINDRA, I. W. 2014. Toward an Integrative Theory of Religious Conversion: A Review Essay of *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* by Lewis R. Rambo and Charles F. Farhadian (2014). *Pastoral Psychology*, 329-343. Her view is based upon Bhaskar’s critical realism paradigm, affirming, ‘the existence of reality on many levels (the empirical, the actual, and the real) without us having to be conscious of it.’ These include ‘the empirical’ (where observations or events are made), ‘the real’ (structures, powers, object mechanisms and tendencies), and ‘the actual’ (events and happenings in the world whether we experience them or not).

psychology of religion that recognizes the value of data of multiple levels of analysis while making nonreductive assumptions concerning the value of spiritual and religious phenomena, yielding a valid comprehensive theory of religiousness’.

A nonreductive theoretical approach to conversion research is commendable and warranted. While a social constructionist view of reality appreciates the phenomenological nature of the emic perspective, it cannot appreciate the ontological emphasis of belief within the emic view. Alternatively, a critical realist perspective has the capacity to value both the phenomenological and ontological nature of the emic view. This section discusses Social Constructionism and Critical Realism as complementary paradigms upon which conversion research can be conducted. Within this thesis, it will be argued that a modest form of critical realism provides the most capacity for valuing the ‘referential’ emic view while still appreciating the ‘constructivist’ aspects of ongoing biographical reconstruction inherent in the conversion narrative and transformation in the convert. In line with Jindra, Emmons and Paloutzian, and Dufault-Hunter, this thesis advocates for a broadened theoretical and pragmatic approach to religious conversion, particularly in the context of Christianity.

5.3. Social Constructionism

5.3.1. Social Constructionism and Knowledge

Many contemporary scholars promote social constructionism as the natural fit for conversion research seeing individual knowledge as a collective social accomplishment. Located within post-modern philosophy, social constructionism is an epistemological perspective based on a constructive theory of knowledge. Popp-Baier (2002, p. 41) clarifies, within this view, ‘knowledge cannot be a reflection of a given reality but is the construction of a world and of the object of knowledge’. It ‘challenges the belief in any kind of reality independent of human efforts and in the notion of true knowledge as an accurate representation of objective order’. Within social constructionism, reality exists independent of our linguistic representations of it although remains inaccessible apart from and constructed by language (Stromberg, 2014, Gergen, 2002). In other words, all knowledge of

reality is socially constructed, negotiated, and sustained – not only how we understand the world and its categories and concepts, but also how we understand ourselves, our identities, meaning and values. Knowledge emanates through social collectivity, human relationships interactions, not through objective observation of the world. Language provides the framework and resource through which interactive construction of reality takes place. Objective reality can not be known, but only experienced and interpreted. There are no universally ‘right’ answers or knowable objective truths; rather, truth is a product of social interactions and practical reasoning within historically and culturally situated contexts. Language determines understanding of the world, but reality cannot be reduced to words.

Scholars advocating for social constructionism dismiss realism as viable candidate for understanding knowledge and approaching research (Yamane, 2000, Popp-Baier, 2002, Gergen, 2002). Epistemological realism is viewed as naïve and inadequate in its capacity of language to represent experience. Yamane (2000) cautions against ‘descriptions as simply realistic representations and not as interpretations or retrospective accounts which seek to render the experiences meaningful and which change over time with the experiencer’s life circumstances or with the social context of the telling’. For Gergen (2002), all theories, facts, descriptions and explanations of the world are not ‘reflections of the real’ as much as they are communal accomplishments, socially derived ongoing social negotiation of reality through relationships. An individual is not ‘bounded and finite’ but rather ‘relational and infinite’ in perpetual construction of rules, of self, and of ongoing narrative.

These scholars reject an objectivist, referential understanding of reality and language due to its impotence and immorality. First, referential ideology cannot provide access or knowledge of objective reality. For Yamane (2000, p. 181) the idea that language points to an independently existing reality and can be used to describe that reality without fundamental distortion, is misguided by ignoring context, interpretation, meaning, and fluidity of content. Gergen (2002) maintains there are no propositions which are ‘candidates for truth’ due to their primary cultural function. In his view (2002, p. 8), ‘A search for ‘the answer’ is replaced

by open-ended dialogue, an invitation for ongoing generative development of ‘truth’.

‘Something *becomes* true as it functions to conform to a shared tradition, a cultural function.’

Sustainability of knowledge and of the object of knowledge only persists based upon the social community upon which they are based. For Gergen, ‘The degree to which a given account of the world or self is sustained across time and is not principally dependent on the objective validity of the account but relies on the vicissitudes of social process.’⁸⁸ This principle of knowledge sustainability through social processes holds tension with opposing viewpoints who contend for the need of an objective external construct as the foundational framework upon social knowledge is built (to be discussed in Section 5.4.)

Secondly, objective claims to knowledge are not only impotent, but morally objectionable due to their tendency to oppress other persons and perspectives, according to Gergen. He (2002, pp. 14-16) characterizes Western presumptions of knowledge as ‘mistakenly bound’ to individual perspectives and actions as realism ‘sees everyone and everything else as ‘other’, isolated and unknown by others, alienated, ‘against all’, narcissistic, defines relationships as secondary, to be used as means to an end.

In sum, scholars such as Popp-Baier, Yamane, and Gergen who embrace social constructionism view knowledge of objective reality as inaccessible, non-dynamic, naïve, individualistic, isolating, and morally repugnant. They assert that assumptions regarding reality can only be made within the socially constructed world as mediated through sensory input, language, social practices and relationships. For these authors, the social constructionism approach alone best supports human knowledge and research of human-generated stories.

5.3.2. Social Constructionism and Personal Narrative

A social constructionism understanding of knowledge naturally supports a constructivist view of narrative as seen in the scholarly work of Staples and Mauss, Snow and

⁸⁸ GERGEN, K. 2002. Social Construction and Practical Theology. In: HERMANS, C. A. M. (ed.) *Social Constructionism and Theology*. BRILL. Gergen contends his own truth claims regarding the nature of social constructionism are not vulnerable to the charge of self-refutation because ‘it makes no claims for itself’ (p. 11).

Machalek, Stromberg, Sremac, and others. In this position, 'narrative truth' is not found in its correspondence with actual events and experiences, but rather in the identity, meaning, mediating, and sense-making the story provides. For Reissman (2008, p. 29) the act of storytelling either *constitutes* the autobiographical self (based on the theory of a co-constructed 'self' produced dialogically) or *reflects* a pre-existing self (based on the idea of a reflected 'self'). Sandelowski (1991, pp. 164-165) maintains that storytelling fosters meaning-making for the storyteller, stating, 'What preoccupies the storyteller and audience is not how to know truth, but rather how experience is endowed with meaning'. In her opinion, narratives are remembrances and constructions about the past in a present moment soon to be the past. Common story elements change from telling to telling, distancing narrative truth from empirical validation due to its meaning-making function. Narrative truth is found in coherent stories which make sense of past experiences or other stories, giving satisfactory closure. Sremac (2010, pp. 18-19) agrees with the meaning-making role narratives provide. For him, narratives allow human experiences and events to be part of a plot that attempts to provide meaning and resolution. He explains, 'The reality of the events does not consist in the fact they occurred but that they were remembered and hold a place in a chronological ordered sequence'. Particular events become intelligible within a narrative providing a coherent story, a whole context of temporally-ordered happenings across time. Events are causally linked and serve to explain the outcome and provide meaning.

Further, narratives play larger sense-making and mediating roles. For Sremac, (2010) narratives are essentially 'sense-making vehicles' giving meaning and expression to human experience, providing explanations, and bringing order and direction to our lives. Story is the primary language of human experience and insight through which humans shape and comprehend their lives. Further, story has a mediating role in human experience between man and the world, between man and man, and between man and himself. For Sremac (2010) a personal narrative must be constructed or adopted in order to makes sense out of

life. These larger sense- and meaning-making roles also contribute to the relationship between social constructionism and the conversion narrative.

5.3.3. Social Constructionism and Conversion Narrative

Conversion narrative is a special form of autobiographical narrative in which a decisive change in author's life story is told. Retrospective accounts of life experiences are perceived, interpreted, and recounted by the convert. Lofland and Skonovd (1981) proposed a three-level view of conversion: first level - the 'reality' of the conversion phenomenon itself; second level - the convert's perceived and stated experience of conversion; and, the third level - the outsider's (researcher's) understanding and explanation of the person's conversion. Social constructionists fundamentally perceive conversion narrative at the second and third levels – not as referential to actual events, but as the interpreted, generative process of self-transformation as achieved through language (Snow and Machalek, 1984, Staples and Mauss, 1987, Brown, 2008, Stromberg, 2014). Staples and Mauss (1987) maintain that the convert plays an active role in self-transformation within conversion as well as self-construction of new ideology through language. For Stromberg (2014) the actual telling of the conversion story is an essential component of the self-transformational nature of conversion, language, and identity formation. Both conversion experiences and stories are culturally generated conventions, potentially conditioned by familiarity with conversion narratives. Conversion stories become meaningful by linking language with experience and the story itself constitutes the narrator's self-transformation. The transformation is not a singular occurrence but instead is sustained, increased, and continued within ongoing social dialogue in which symbolic meaning is given to their experiences. The language performance itself is considered as central to the efficacy of conversion, self-transformation, and self-understanding within a larger community. Specific language features and content of conversion stories vary depending upon particular religious group stories.

Other scholars perceive conversion stories as both referential and generative in achieving transformation (Sremac, 2010, Popp-Baier, 2002). Sremac (2010) claims the act of

conversion marks ‘the ending of the old’ and ‘beginning of the new’ as converts reinterpret their past in order to bring it in alignment with their new understanding of themselves and the world through their conversion testimony. These conversion narratives are transformational in two ways – as constitutive in the way language creates meaning in a particular social context, and as referential in relationship to symbolic realities. For Popp-Baier (2002) conversion becomes transformational at the referential level when converts’ language is meaningfully linked with new religious group experience. Conversion becomes transformational at the generative level as the symbolic nature of the language contributes towards change. Converts learn to use religious language in the contexts of certain religious and social relationships, thereby reconstructing their life story and its related meaning within this language.⁸⁹ Accordingly, whether generative or referential, language use contributes to the biographical reconstruction and transformation of converts and warrants attention in analysis of conversion stories.

In addition, unreliability of convert testimony should be kept in mind, according to scholars (Stromberg, 2014, Brown, 2008, Gergen, 2002, Snow and Machalek, 1984). Narrative change occurs over time with repeated tellings in different social contexts. Brown (2008, p., 1037) confirms self-narratives are ‘worked on’ by situated actors – formed, repaired, maintained, strengthened and revised to provide a continuing sense of ‘coherence and distinctiveness’. Stromberg (2014) presumes conversion accounts as unreliable sources of information about past events and experiences but are the ‘proper subject of study themselves’. These cautions echo Snow and Machalek’s (1984) earlier perspective who argue that converts’ accounts are unreliable due to their felt imperative to ‘fit’ the new worldview paradigm, their temporal variability over time and tellings, and their changing the past to fit their new story. Within this understanding, claims to knowledge of transcendent truth have

⁸⁹ POPP-BAIER, U. Ibid. Conversion as a Social Construction: A Narrative Approach to Conversion Research. Popp-Baier on Social Constructionism – (Gergen/Wittgenstein) language is not used to share contents of their minds but language derives its meaning from the ways they are used within relationships. ‘What we take to be true about the world or self, is not thus a product of the individual mind. Meanings are born of coordinations among persons – agreements, negotiations, affirmations. From this standpoint, relationships *stand prior to* all that is intelligible.’ (Gergen 1999, p. 48.)

no warrant within conversion testimonies. Gergen (2002, p. 9) remarks, 'Even though communities can empirically investigate an observed phenomenon and build confidence of such claims within a trusted community, in the end, the communities are culturally situated and have no warrant to claim transcendent truth'. Due to the situatedness of culturally constructed claims alongside limitations of human knowledge, claims to transcendent truth as well as conversion accounts as historical fact are deemed inept and inappropriate for the researcher within social constructionism.

In sum, the social constructionism view of conversion narrative, per Popp-Baier (2002), affirms that converts make assumptions about himself, others, and the world in which they structure their actions and experience them as purposeful, changing sense of identity and meaning. Through language use and the adoption of a new universe of discourse, the convert achieves self-transformation as demonstrated through biographical reconstruction. Through conversion stories, individuals tell their life stories, recounting and connecting relevant events across time in order to make coherent narratives. Conversion stories are seen as social discourse, open to continuous alteration and progression through self-reflection and engagement with others. For the researcher, this social constructionism view of conversion has implications for narrative analysis.

5.3.4. Social Constructionism and Narrative Analysis

A social constructionism understanding of knowledge, language, and narrative also informs conversion research and analysis. According to Popp-Baier (2002), prior to the linguistic turn conversion research relied upon converts' verbal reports as 'fairly accurate accounts' of past events and experiences surrounding conversion. After the linguistic turn, conversion stories were no longer evaluated in terms of their referential function, but were primarily interpreted as generative acts of speech and communication. Since the 1980s, the experiential phenomenon of religious conversion itself was promoted along with a diminished emphasis upon whether or not it was 'true'.

Several scholars endorse a social constructionism form of narrative analysis (Popp-Baier, 2002, Gergen, 2002, Zock, 2006, Yamane, 2000, Sandelowski, 1991) through which they respect the converts' perceived conversion experience, as well as the narrative content, function, transformational nature, and social contexts. As in theory, truth is not in view in narrative study. For Gergen (2002, pp. 10, 12) the constructionist analyst is

not likely to ask about truth, validity or objectivity of a given account...Language samples are not maps or mirrors of referential worlds but are rather reflections of modes of life, rituals, and relations of control and dominion...[they] invite reflective posture, to remove truth beyond perspective, to consider grounding assumptions that shape concepts, observations and conclusions.⁹⁰

Generative theory constructionism encourages greater creativity without the constraints of ontological presumptions. The researcher can be guided less by 'what there is' than 'what may become' as he/she 'dances new meanings into being'. For Yamane (2000, p. 176), the original events and experiences are only historically accessible through the converts' memories and account, and the researcher should instead give attention to the way people make sense of and convey their experiences. In his view, their language and narratives are 'interpretation all the way down'. Zock (2006, p. 41) also endorses constructionism as the proper mode of analysis:

It would be naïve to think that conversion stories are the accounts of what 'really happened' to an individual – what he or she really felt, experienced, thought, saw and heard. Rather, the stories reflect the cultural models of conversion prevalent in a particular time, group or subgroup.⁹¹

Different types of empirical research emerged for analyzing conversion narrative.

Popp-Baier (2002, pp. 54-56) defined two paradigms of conversion narrative analysis as situated prior to and following the linguistic turn: One type emphasizes the telling of narratives in order to conform to preconceived models of religious conversion. Although the

⁹⁰ GERGEN, K. Ibid. Social Construction and Practical Theology.

⁹¹ ZOCK, H. 2006. Paradigms in Psychological Conversion Research: Between Social Science and Literary Analysis. In: JAN BREMMER, W. V. B. A. A. M. (ed.) *Paradigms, Poetics and Politics of Conversion*. Leuven, Belgium: Peeters. However, she acknowledges this approach raises also some important questions potentially missed: *Why do people change from one belief to another?* Which functions does conversion have? What are the psychic and social predispositions towards conversion in what contexts? And, what are the effects of conversion on the individual?

stories are reconstructed, they are presumed to relate actual conversion experiences. The research aim was to assess the story's basic content and function. The other type views conversion narrative as expressions of self-transformation through speech acts, changes in 'universe of discourse' through biographical reconstruction.

Moving beyond mere descriptive content, researchers began to emphasize other aspects of the conversion narrative. Popp-Baier and other researchers highlight the interpretive and motivational nature of the conversion narrative – not only by the narrator in the immediate context of narration, but also the listener, reader, or researcher in interpreting the story (Riessman, 2008, Elliot, 2005, Sandelowski, 1991). She conducts analysis based upon Gergen's framework considering narrative structure, rhetoric, and process.⁹²

Elliot (2005, pp. 9, 12-13) advises, '[narrative] evaluation should not be understood as simply provided by the narrator; rather the achievement of agreement on the evaluation of a narrative is the product of a process of negotiation. While the speaker can be understood as responsible for producing a narrative with an acceptable evaluation, the listener must collaborate by demonstrating that the evaluation has been understood'.

In order to promote a balanced methodology, Elliot (2005) advocates two basic approaches to narrative analysis. First, the 'naturalist approach' ('ontological') – '*what is said*' - *describes* life stories and/or episodes, contexts, conflicts and event significance, as well as relationship between personal story and available cultural stories. These 'first order narratives' are stories individuals tell about themselves and their own experiences, as in personal testimonies. Secondly, the 'constructionist approach' ('representational') – '*how and why it is said*' - *explains* why something happened. These 'second-order narratives' are

⁹² POPP-BAIER, U. 2002. Conversion as a Social Construction: A Narrative Approach to Conversion Research. In: HERMANS, C. A. M. (ed.) *Social Constructionism and Theology*. BRILL. Popp-Baier organizes conversion analysis based upon Gergen's three-part framework (2002, pp. 54-56): 1) Structure - considers a set of conventions, habits or ways of life that are stable and recurring and examines the canonical language providing a certain structure and topics for conversion narratives (such as how narrative account conforms to preconceived model, how biographical reconstruction is structured by conversion plot); 2) Rhetoric – studies use of language structure to frame the world and achieve certain effects (analyzing social effects of the language conventions used in the story; analyzing how canonical language becomes behavior for self and others); and, 3) Process – evaluates ongoing flow of social interchange and conversations (interpretation in the context of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee). Popp-Baier confirms the interview narrative itself as part of the convert's self-transformation through biographical reconstruction in which 'different micro-stories become coherent within the macro-story.'

accounts which the researcher constructs to make sense of other people's experiences and of the social world, presenting social and historical knowledge. Sandelowski (1991) asserts the goal of narrative analysis is to provide an intelligible, comprehensive narrative of *why* something happened that is well grounded and constitutes a supportable emplotment of events (actions and intentions). She cautions researchers to give primary focus to the stories themselves before transforming them into the descriptions and theories of the lives they represent. Riessman (2008) agrees that narrative analysis should attend to *how and why* incidents are storied, not simply the content to which the language refers. Researchers should attend to extended accounts, looking beyond the surface of the text towards broader commentary and what the story accomplishes for individuals and/or groups (such as identity construction, persuasion, entertainment, deception). She advocates holistic narrative analysis in order to preserve the story for interpretation and understand its structure, function, meaning, and context rather than merely isolate and segment text for thematic coding. For Riessman, this analysis includes structural, dialogic, and visual analysis.⁹³

More recently, Nieuwkerk (2014) divided narrative analysis approaches based upon vocation, theory, and socialization. The 'first approach' (as used by religious scholars, psychologists and sociologists) considers conversion as a way for the convert to create a new identity, sense of self, and form of belonging. The 'second approach' (as advocated by historians and anthropologists) emphasizes discourse and narrative analysis within a religious community. The second approach focuses on deconstruction of the discourse, analyzing how conversion stories are created and recreated in the converts' communities and how the

⁹³ RIESSMAN, C. K. 2008. *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, Los Angeles, CA, Sage Publications.

Structural analysis is concerned with how a narrator uses form and language to achieve particular effects, looking how an account is put together and made understandable (e.g., attending to social linguistics, analysis of sequences of verbal acts – abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, coda) (pp. 84, 103).

Dialogic/Performance analysis investigates the interaction between investigator, narrator, setting, and social circumstances of the narration. This approach asks 'to whom' 'when' and 'why' is the narrative given and how particularity of the context informs the giving and receiving of the story (p. 105).

Visual analysis appreciates non-verbal forms of communication (e.g., gesture, body movement, sound, images) as part of the subjective interpretation of narrative (pp. 141, 179). These methods of narrative analysis can be used in isolation or together to provide an interpretation per case more than for generalization for a whole group.

narratives themselves become meaningful towards in communicating the conversion experiences.

5.3.5. Social Constructionism Discussion

The social constructionism perspective of knowledge, language, narrative, and research appreciates several positive contributions towards understanding and analyzing conversion. Theoretically, social constructionism offers a pragmatic view of human limitations in accessibility to and confidence in knowledge claims as well as the need for contextualizing life experiences, interpretations, and their ‘tellings’ within immediate context(s) and within the story’s meta-narrative location. Social constructionism researchers value a broadened scope of narrative analysis ranging from discourse content, structure, and function to its transformational, meaning-making, sense-making, identity forming nature. Further, this theory regards the role of the researcher as reflexive interpreter and ‘re-teller’ of the conversion story, both adding layered complexity to narrative analysis. Most importantly, constructionism researchers are increasingly contending for a more holistic understanding and analysis of conversion.

These positive attributes of social constructionism provide clarity for the researcher in understanding and approaching conversion research. However, it also raises a few issues of concern, particularly in the context of this research. If what Jindra reports is true, that evangelical convert narratives value the (‘absolute’) truth of their story, reduction of their conversion stories to merely generative language absent of a ‘real’ referent may be problematic. If it is, as Yamane says, ‘interpretation all the way down’, the converts’ trust in the research process may be compromised. A methodological limitation or an *a priori* skepticism may be perceived by the convert, compromising authenticity of the story on both speaker and listener. Further, the transformational nature of conversion is reduced to a self- and/or language-generated phenomenon. Any referential ‘reality’ causing transformation, believed as transcendent truth or supernatural reality is dismissed. When the researcher moves beyond mere description (what and how) of the conversion and transformation process

towards causality (why the conversion occurred), the analyst has no live options beyond generated explanations. They, by self-limitation, must provide cause beyond and contrary to the converts' explanations of cause if substantive causes are not considered viable. These issues potentially beg the questions Gergen (2002, pp. 10, 12) himself poses: 'The analyst is invited to ask, 'From what standpoint is the inquiry taking place?' 'What values are at stake?' 'Whose voices are silenced by approaching the work from this particular standpoint?' The limitations within a social constructionism paradigm provide warrant towards considering whether or not critical realism can give a justifiable solution.

5.4. Critical Realism

Classically understood, Christianity does not claim to be 'just a religious story', one of many socially constructed myths, but is the (objective) true story of reality. The truth of Christianity is based upon its evidential and historical claims associated with particular people and events over time in history as purposed through the supernatural agency of God. A reductionistic view of supernatural reality, truth, or personal transformation compromises a holistic understanding and analysis of Christian conversion narratives. Therefore, it seemed judicious to consider Critical Realism as a potential theory upon which research with Christian converts could be grounded. In this section, Critical Realism theory will be discussed regarding knowledge, personal and conversion narratives, as well as its potential complementary use with social construction theory. Within this research, the understood ethical nature of conversion testimony is in view and allows thoughts, attitudes, emotions, events, and experiences as expressed by the convert to be taken at face value. As in a phenomenological perspective, it is not the listener's role in this project to determine the stories' correspondence to reality but rather understood as what the converts themselves believed, experienced, and provided meaning. However, critical realism is in view due to convert testimonies regarding ontological or 'real' intervention of the divine in their lives causing conversion and life change to occur. Together, the converts' perspectives coupled with transformational nature of conversion become the focus of attention.

5.4.1. Critical Realism and Knowledge

A number of academic scholars support critical realism as a viable theory and method for use in the human sciences. Sayer (2000, p. 32) asserts, 'Critical realism is a philosophy of and for the social sciences.' In his and others' views, critical realism has been misunderstood as claiming an infallible access to objective reality, that ontology (the object of knowledge) has been confused with epistemology (knowledge of the object). Longhofer and Hoy (2012) challenge social constructionism as a form of social reductionism, arguing that reality (ontology) is reduced to how we know it (epistemology). Sayer clarifies, '[Critical realism] is mainly concerned with ontology, with being, and has a relatively open or permissive stance towards epistemology – the theory of knowledge'. Bhaskar (2008, p. 5), calls this the epistemic fallacy: statements about 'being'/'what is' are interpreted as statements about knowledge. Based upon the work of Bhaskar (1986), Sayer (2000, p. 2) claims that critical realism is based *not* upon the *infallibility* but the *fallibility* of knowledge within 'epistemic relativism'. He argues that we know an objective reality exists regardless of what we happen to think about it based upon our experience of 'getting things wrong, of having our expectations confounded, and of crashing into things'. In his view, critical realism does not claim privileged access to knowledge and truth as in foundationalism and simple correspondence to reality. Rather, it acknowledges that 'the world can only be known under particular descriptions, in terms of available discourses, though it does not follow from this that no description or explanation is better than any other' ('judgmental relativism').

To press his point, Sayer states, 'If the world itself was a product or construction of our knowledge, then our knowledge would surely be infallible, for how could we ever be mistaken about anything? How could it be said that things were not as we supposed?' To resolve this tension, Sayer (2000) perceives critical realism as providing a 'middle way' in between in between the 'unknowability' of knowledge grounding social constructionism and the over-confidence of knowledge as found in modernist foundationalism. He is among other voices (Jindra, 2016, Longhofer, et.al., 2012, Bhaskar, 1989) who propose critical realism as

the optimal approach to knowledge and narrative. They maintain all philosophies, discourses and practical activities presuppose a realism, some ontology or general account of the world. Even Gergen (2002, pp. 13-14, 20) acknowledges issues of ontology are unavoidable, admitting, 'The choice of method is inevitably a choice of ontology...all methodologies harbor political, moral and ideological ramifications.'

Therefore, the question is not whether an ontological understanding is in view, but for Bhaskar (1989, p. 2), 'the crucial question is *what kind?*':

Critical realists do not deny the reality of events and discourses; on the contrary, they insist upon them. But they hold that we will only be able to understand – and so change – the social world if we identify the structures at work that generate those events or discourses. Such structures are irreducible to patterns of events and discourses alike.

Bhaskar points out that social constructionism (the 'new realism') fails to recognize enduring structures and generative mechanisms underlying and producing observable phenomena and events. That is, social structures rely upon pre-existing 'older' cognitive concepts and linguistic frameworks which make 'new' concepts possible.⁹⁴ Bhaskar (1989, p. 13) proposes transcendental realist ontology (a form of critical realism) as an essential precursor to the activity of social constructionism. That is, if knowledge is socially constructed, 'knowledge of objects requires objects of knowledge' and, ontology ('being') precedes epistemology ('knowing'). These objects include physical, non-physical/conceptual, or linguistically-produced 'structures'. In this view, critical realism provides the foundation upon which social constructionism is built, changes, and endures through dialogue. Critical realism provides the substance or prior reference upon which social constructionism 'constructs'. He (1989, p. 13) asserts, 'Realism is not a substitute for, but rather helps to guide empirically controlled investigations into the structures generating social phenomena' whereas, the 'new realist' view empties the social world of any enduring structural

⁹⁴ For example, a memory cannot occur without a preceding event or thought. Memory does not make the occurrence real – the real event provides substance for and precedes the memory and recounting.

dimension’.’ That is, without ontological foundation and enduring concepts, there would be nothing to which a narrative (or language) refers or derives meaning.

Further, critical realism not only provides the ontological support upon which social constructionism is built, but also establishes the framework upon which transformation is possible. In Bhaskar’s words (1989, p. 4), society provides ‘means, media, rules, and resources for everything we do [but] these structures pre-exist us and are only reproduced or transformed in our everyday activities...All social structures depend upon or presuppose social relations pre-existing the individuals who enter into them and whose activity reproduces or transforms them; so they are themselves structures’.⁹⁵ With social constructionism alone, social structures and knowledge of history are always a ‘perpetually assembled now’ and cannot be sustained. Yet, social practice and societies presuppose transformation is possible absent of relational structures preceding it. This form of ontological reductionism in Bhaskar’s and others’ views leads to a theoretical collapse of social constructionism, sawing off the branch upon which it is sitting. Alternatively, embracing critical realism provides the necessary support for the enduring social structures upon which social construction is made possible. It provides the necessary ontology (object of knowledge) for epistemology (knowledge of the object).

More than providing foundational support for knowledge, relationships, and transformation of social structures, critical realism is advantageous for investigative study. For Longhofer and Hoy (2012, pp. 7-8), critical realism allows researchers to engage with the complexities of knowledge, making distinctions between ‘the real’ world which exists independent from observation and our empirical experience of it. Emphasizing the existence of brute facts, structures, mechanisms, and objects independent of our knowledge of them,

⁹⁵ SAYER, A. 2000. *Realism and Social Science*, London, England, SAGE Publications, Ltd., p. 11 citing Bhaskar, 2008, pp. 236-237): In short, the real is that which exists: physical (i.e., atomic, chemical, and biological structures), social (i.e., ideologies and social class), and psychological (i.e., mental structures, schemas, unconscious processes and memory, object relations). (4) These objects of science, that is, the things we study, have been called by critical realists ‘intransitive’: entities (structures, causal powers, mechanisms) that exist independently from observation. And some contemporary philosophers call these brute facts. The domain of the real refers to the structures, powers, mechanisms, and tendencies of objects.

Longhofer and Hoy maintain the world (ontological) cannot be conflated with our experience with (empirical) and knowledge of it (epistemological). ‘The actual’ refers to what happens if and when mechanisms which belong to ‘the real’ are activated and can be independent of experience and may go unobserved. Alternatively, constructivism argues that the world or self can never be independent of our knowledge of them or be apprehended apart from social construction; selves are mere constructions through discourse (there are no pre-linguistic selves), and inter-subjectivity replaces or supersedes intra-subjectivity. In their view, critical realism provides a way out of the relativism often found in various forms of constructivism and social reductionism. Further, Longhofer and Hoy (2012, p. 23) contend critical realism considers agents, objects, or structures to have causal capacities. This is important because study method includes assumptions we make – not only about ‘what exists’ but also ‘what causes what exists’. Methodology requires that we look into *how* we come to know *what* we know. They affirm the need for critical realism in studying causation (Longhofer and Hoy (2012) citing Houston (2005), p. 27):

From a critical realist perspective, causation is not established through the observation of empirical regularities among sequences of events. What causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times it has been observed. Instead, explanation results from identifying causal mechanisms, how they work, discovering if they have been activated, and under what conditions in open systems.

Furthermore, *it involves discovering the nature of the structure or object possessing the causal power(s) under investigation*. Critical realism disarticulates causation from the establishment of empirical regularities. And by so doing it enables us to see how unique events (and repeated ones) can be caused by the same structures or mechanisms.

In religious conversion, separating causation from experience becomes vital. Critical realism lays the enduring conceptual foundation upon which social constructionism builds knowledge and social structures and provides a way to acknowledge causality. The next step is to see how critical realism theory supports narrative.

5.4.2. Critical Realism and Narrative as History

Within critical realism, conversion stories are forms of historical narrative. However, before conversion testimonies can be considered as such, narrative itself must have justification for being deemed as historical. Although some scholars (Osborne 2005, Frykenberg, 2001, and Fackre, 2001) argue for narratives as natural tools for conveying actual occurrences, other advocates of constructionism (Yamane, 2000) deny this capacity. Osborne (2005, pp. 683-684) maintains, 'Most ancient history comes down to us in narrative form, and so the reader must be aware of both the literary and the historical elements. As narrative, the stories contain real/implied author, point of view, ideology, story time, plot, characterization, setting, implicit commentary, and real/implied reader...As history, the author seeks a depiction of what really happened'. One of the first questions that must be addressed is whether or not historical narrative, by its nature, has the capacity to communicate events and/or experiences that are true (corresponding to actual events) or whether they are reduced to subjective interpretations that may or may not describe what actually happened. Frykenberg (2001, pp. 116, 123) considered whether or not storied accounts can be viewed with historical integrity. He argued, 'No element in history is more basic than narrative. Indeed, it is the basic and essential element. History is story... Historical events by themselves which occur within an otherwise shapeless context and a seemingly unstructured environment require structured narration to document and establish authenticity.' Based upon this premise, Frykenberg (2001, pp. 117-118) affirms narrative as essential for contextually grounding historical knowledge:

The way we understand history – the way all purposed human action and thought is understood – is to understand what happened, how it happened and why it happened. It is to understand particular actions and events and thoughts within particular situations circumstances and contexts.

Story or narrative is the foundation for historical knowledge and is a unique form of human understanding (*sui generis*). In history, there is always a story... Through the telling of the story itself, the essentials of historical understanding are produced and transmitted through the compelling character of its essentials...

Narrative, if fully appreciated and comprehended in all of its manifold or subtle implications, becomes the quintessentially ideal vehicle for acquainting people with – and for the acquisition and transmission of – true understandings of the past...provides echoes of something that no longer exists and restores awareness of things that once were and are no more.

Regarding form and structure, historical narrative follows a sequence of actions, events, and experiences in the life or lives of one or more persons, ‘adorning the present with scenes of the past’, according to Frykenberg (2001, pp. 116-117). Narratives usually consist of a chain of ‘little stories’ or ‘anecdotes’⁹⁶ which form insights, awareness, and interest. Each sequence of anecdotes leads to a larger story and to some ultimate climax. Each true anecdote attempts to convey human experience as it once happened, connecting sequences of actions and events to ‘reconstruct life’. For Frykenberg (2001, p. 124), anecdotes are:

an ideal vehicle for conveying factual details about an actual event...Short accounts of ‘hard little truth’ about single isolated events, experiences or incidents taking place at crucial turning-points within larger courses of events have become the very essence of most genuine historical understandings... Anecdote-as-history depends on the framework of the larger historical narrative for its veracity.

Fackre (2001) agrees that narrative is not composed of merely self-contrived events and experiences but includes historical referents which can be evaluated through evidence, reason, and correspondence to reality as to their truthfulness. Conversely, social constructionist Yamane (2000, pp. 183-184) argues that historical events and experiential referents become fleeting over time. He states, ‘because experiencing is an ongoing temporal flow, its objective existence is fleeting. By the time the individual comes to understand the experience, it has past. What remains is the memory, the interpretation, the linguistification, the recounting, the emplotment, the narrativization. This is the ‘data’ which sociologists

⁹⁶FRYKENBERG, R. 2001. Anecdote as the Essence of Historical Understanding. In: YANDELL, K. (ed.) *Faith and Narrative*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Distinguishing features of an anecdote (‘small hard truth’ Greek *anekdota*): 1) effective or genuine only if, to the degree that, it conveys something true. It documents an event, particular happenings and experiences in the past. (Without truth – just a funny story or joke; Without story – no more than assertion with truth-bearing potentialities.); 2) has a formal structure – beginning, middle, end; 3) narrates facts and circumstances, giving details in sequence, telling ‘how it was’ out of someone’s memory; facts must not contradict deeper historically verifiable truths 4) refrains from drawing any general conclusions; audience/reader draws inferences and connects the particular to the general; 5) carries truth that is memorable; 6) extremely and profoundly personal, if not private; 7) creates illusion – artful; 8) captures the human spirit, emotion; and, 9) conveys historical authenticity as anecdote only if, when and to the degree that it demonstrates detachment between the teller and the thing told; 10) can be autobiographical, biographical or non-biographical, pp. 119-121.

must study.’ However, prior concepts of narrative structure, enduring form, event sequencing, historical referents, and interpretive bases require ontological existence before an individual’s narrative data can be understood, interpreted, and analyzed. Ontological essence as well as the constructive nature of memory, events, and dialogue both play a role within the ‘reconstruction’ of historical narrative. A balanced, complementary application of social constructionism and critical realism to narrative analysis will be discussed in Section 5.4.5. But before that, the issue of recognizing Christian narrative as history will be addressed.

5.4.3. Critical Realism, Christian Narrative as History

In general, religious narratives are not considered to be historical but fictional mythological genre. Many literary critics argue that the biblical narratives are ahistorical, fictive, inventive story. Yet, others defend its historical veracity. Griffiths (2001) maintains religious communities either explicitly or implicitly presume the truth of their narrative and its description about the nature of the world and human persons, asserting doctrinal, truth, and value statements as authoritatively binding for the community. Regarding Christianity, Osborne (2005, p. 678) argues ‘there is nothing intrinsically ahistorical in the historical narratives of Scripture...The question is not whether or not there is an historical element, but how to discover that element and ascertain its accuracy. This is the task of critical research’. The biblical narrative makes certain historical claims of God acting through particular events and persons at particular times and places. Christianity is built upon the reality of key happenings in the historical person and life Jesus Christ and the first century church by its authors⁹⁷ and scholars. Regarding the historical reliability of the Luke/Acts biblical texts, Bruce (1981, 92-93) states,

The historical trustworthiness of Luke has indeed been acknowledged by many biblical critics whose standpoint has been definitely liberal. And it is a conclusion of high importance for those who consider the New Testament from the angle of the historian...

⁹⁷ For example, in writing Jesus’s biography, Luke begins his narrative with clearly historical tone: ‘Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were *eyewitnesses* and servants of the word, ³ it seemed fitting for me as well, *having investigated everything carefully* from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; ⁴ so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.’

The picture which Luke gives us of the rise of Christianity is generally consonant with the witness of the other three Gospels and of Paul's letters. And he puts this picture in the frame of contemporary history in a way which would inevitably invite exposure if his work were that of a romancer, but which in fact *provides a test and vindication on historical grounds of the trustworthiness of his own writings*, and with them at least the main outline of the origins of Christianity presented to us in the New Testament as a whole.

Biblical authors emphasize that if the events described within the biblical texts did not happen in time/space history then Christianity is considered to be false, useless, and not worthy of belief.⁹⁸ Fackre (1996, pp. 27-28) emphasizes the historical nature of the Christian story, but that it also possesses meta-narrative significance and purpose. He states,

Story by no means excludes history. The Christian recital could not exclude empirical narrative, or it would cease to be Christian, for its central events presuppose hard empirical claims – Jesus did live, Jesus did die on the cross, and on that elusive boundary between empirical and trans-empirical reality Jesus did rise from the grave.

But as story, the description of these and other events is patterned according to a larger meaning. The narrator who gives this overall signification is, finally, God, whose purposes are dimly perceived by the seers whose accounts constitute the Scriptures.⁹⁹

Evangelical Christians affirm this historical perspective. According to Fackre (2001, pp. 195-198), for them, 'scriptural stories mean just what they say', that the Christian story is 'true to life' as well as culturally transcendent, 'true for us'. These basic assertions refer to realities existing independent of the grammar of these stories, requiring ontological truth claims for the decisive historical and transcendent referents in the story'. Scholars acknowledge hermeneutical changes in the 18th century which changed biblical interpretation from emphasis on authorial intent and historical correspondence to mere coherence and

⁹⁸ I Corinthians (written ~40-45 C.E.) is a letter written from the apostle Paul to the first century church in Corinth, Greece. Paul tells the foundational story of the Christian faith, emphasizing the historical nature of the events surrounding the death, burial, physical resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ as literally true - not merely figurative. If these historical claims are proven false, the historical reality upon which Christian belief is grounded is undermined, particularly in chapter 15.

⁹⁹ FACKRE, G. 1996. *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine*, Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Although truths are proclaimed within the Christian narrative, its adherents also believe no one is exempt from personal interpretation, human finitude and fallenness in knowing the truth within a modest epistemology. However, two influences help provide a clearer understanding of truth: A proper self-critical theology brings to light influences that distort our perspectives encouraging constant scrutiny with ecclesial, biblical, and Christological inquiry; and the Holy Spirit who provides guidance, wisdom, and insight into truth and the bible. (Fackre, 1996, 18, 22) We also (as Sayer implies) 'bump into reality' which serves as a helpful corrective to our knowledge.

construction of the believer's journey (Fackre, 2001, Wolterstorff, 2001, Jeffrey, 2001).

Jeffrey (2001) maintains recent trends in deconstructionism attempted to separate forms of knowledge from any reference to external nature, experience or historical process; and that realistic narratives (e.g., biblical narrative, autobiography) seem awkward, neglected, and increasingly marginalized. Wolterstorff (2001, pp. 202-205) confirmed, 'Before the rise of historical criticism, Western Christian reading of the Bible was strongly realistic and historical.' The church's identity was a '*story-constituted identity*' shaped by the biblical narrative as providing a picture of reality to be believed and lived. Reversal of biblical interpretation through Hans Frei and others caused an 'eclipsing of the realistic character of the narrative' and a diminished authority of the Bible.

However, religious narratives are more than merely historical in nature. Religious narratives can be symbolic and meaningful pointing beyond to a greater reality. Fackre (1996, p. 28) argues 'symbolic truth' can point towards 'the truth of the symbol'. He states, 'The power of symbol and saga enables us to make our way into the Reality who meets us in a commensurate mode of engagement (symbolic truth), and the latter is the conceptual assertion of the fact, not the fiction, of the One who comes (the truth of the symbol)'. Goldberg (2001, p. 52) agrees, particularly as pertaining to the Judeo-Christian narrative. In his view, all religious stories cannot be automatically reduced to or conflated with fabricated mythic fables and allegories. Some 'myths' can and do refer to a reality, although some myths 'are truer than others'; and, the veracity of biblical narrative lies in its faithful depiction of the structure of reality and to human experience. He (2001, pp. 44-45) states, 'religious stories are not merely moral truth given through the story and then discarded but are rather truths embodied in and through story'. For example, literary scholar Lewis (1955) appreciated the narrative, moral nature of Christianity, but also its factual historicity. An

expert in mythology, when Atheist Lewis examined the Gospel narratives, he was surprised to find them different than fabricated myth but had the ring of historical truth.¹⁰⁰

Further, the ethical nature of the bible can also ‘ring true’, causing response from the reader. For Jeffrey (2001) The reader recognizes the truth of the sinfulness and brokenness of self and humanity, becoming aware of a need for repentance, senses the moral authority of the text and through this common experience senses the truth of the Bible. In this way, the reader not only reads the text but is also ‘read by’ the text. The combination of compelling moral and historical biblical truths becomes potentially persuasive to religious seeker and warrants a place in the study of conversion. Hindmarsh (2014, p. 351-352) sees conversion narratives as containing ethical, intellectual, and historical characteristics as relating to reality. Ethically, conversion narratives imply strong standards of goodness (such as what constitutes human flourishing and what detracts from it); intellectually, conversion narratives deal with ultimate questions and present a narrative apologia for particular beliefs; and, historically, conversion narratives present themselves as ‘true’ to history and have explanatory power. For Hindmarsh (2014), the central issue in autobiographical narrative is the extent to which the convert is constructed or discovered, and the extent to which the conversion narrative is a creation of fiction, the reporting of facts, or a hybrid of both. Including a ‘real’ causal referent for the conversion narrative does not dismiss constructivist influence. Similarly, for Yamane (2000) converts recall events or experiences within a temporal ordering (beginning, middle, and end) and a moral ordering (implying an underlying ‘right or wrong’ moral direction of the narrative towards resolution). Within a constructivist view, this moral direction is inferred from relativized individual or social moral imperative. However, the historical and intellectual aspects are diminished.

¹⁰⁰ LEWIS, C. S. 1955. *Surprised by Joy*, Orlando, Florida, Harcourt Books. In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, he remarked on its convincing nature as a story that actually happened (1955, p. 236): ‘I was by now too experienced in literary criticism to regard the Gospels as myths. They had not the mythical taste. And yet the very matter that they set down in their artless, historical fashion . . . was precisely the matter of the great myths. If ever a myth had become fact, had been incarnated, it would be just like this. And nothing else in all literature was just like this. Myths were like it one way. Histories were like it in another. But nothing was simply like it. And no person was like the Person it depicted; as real. . . yet also numinous. . . God. Here and here only in all time the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man. This is not ‘a religion,’ nor ‘a philosophy.’ It is the summing up and actuality of them all.’

Despite a rise in a more liberal interpretation of scripture for some scholars as well as prominence of social constructionism for other scholars, for conservative Christian communities the historical, intellectual, and moral truthfulness of the biblical narrative remains an important aspect of belief and conversion. Within the context of this research, the impetus is not to prove the historical or verifiable truth of Christianity, but to demonstrate its relevance in light of potential, educated converts considering its worthiness of belief.

5.4.4. Critical Realism and Conversion Research

In light of the historical, moral, and intellectual nature of the Christian metanarrative, critical realism provides a good fit for conversion research. Osborne (2005, p. 677) asserts, ‘The best method by far for developing a biblical historiography is that of ‘critical realism’, namely the belief that there is something ‘real’ in the text to be discovered and that it must be ascertained by the way of ‘critical’ research’. In conversion research, critical realism allows room for participants’ authentic stories, perceptions, and experiences as informing the religious conversion process. For Maxwell (2012, pp. 1, 5, 8), critical realism presumes meaning, mental states, culture, causation and physical entities are equally ‘real’ rather than merely theoretical abstractions or social constructions. Critical realists

retain an ontological realism (there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories, and construction) while accepting a form of epistemological constructivism and relativism (our *understanding* of this world is inevitably a construction from our own perspectives and standpoint all knowledge is partial, incomplete and fallible.)

He (2012) argues that critical realists can retain an ontological realism, reject multiple realities, yet appreciate varying perspectives on reality are part of the world we want to understand, and that our understanding can be more or less correct. Critical realism ‘treat(s) the ideas and meanings held by individuals – their concepts, beliefs, feelings, intentions, and so on – as equally real to physical objects and processes...that the meanings people attach to things have consequences for their actions and for the physical world’ (Maxwell, 2012, p. viii). Within this research, a critical realism approach provides a conceptual framework for investigating the presence of intellectual, spiritual, and functional variables in the conversion

process. It allows for convert beliefs, feelings, intentions, and meanings to be taken as ‘real’ and meaningful. Further, if God exists, it also grants the possibility that He interacts with humanity in providing true knowledge of his existence, understanding of God, self, and the world, as well as acting to cause an individual’s transformation.

5.4.5. Social Constructionism and Critical Realism Working Together

Within the scope of this study, critical realism presumes an ontological realism and a modest epistemology allowing for perceived knowledge of the real world. That is, the subjects’ conversions can be motivated through changed belief in what is deemed to be ‘objectively true’ based upon justified warrant.¹⁰¹ Religion within this research is acknowledged as *sui generis*, more than sociological and/or psychological construct. For Penner and Yonan (1972), a ‘deeply substantive’ religion possesses intellectual realization of transcendent truth, a belief that the ultimate exists, as well as the existential experience of, response and commitment to ultimate reality. A comprehensive view of religion and conversion allows for the possible ontologic reality of an agent, an ultimate, transcendent being in whom humans intellectually and existentially believe, with whom humans report palpable experience and/or relationship. This ultimate agent potentially ontologically exists as an object of belief, existentially acts to bring about belief, provides ontological reality to religious experiences, and brings real meaning, purpose, and grounding for religious belief (within theistic worldviews).

Allowance for an enlarged conceptual reality in and through which religious conversion occurs is justified. This expanded view allows for the reality of religion to exist in more than merely the believer and permits potential reality of the ultimate agent who exists and interacts with the believer or collective reality in particular psycho-emotional, social, cultural, religious capacities to enable belief, existing prior to and provides cause for such belief. The ontologic irreducibility of the sacred also allows for various functional ways in

¹⁰¹ Justified warrant: conversion from belief in non-existence of God to belief and trust in the ‘real’ existence of God and truths of Christianity through abductive reasoning and/or inference to the best explanation considering all Function and Substance variables.

which individuals can know and experience the ultimate reality of God. This view allows for interaction and active engagement with agency, social-cultural realities, and individuals as they initiate and respond to direct and indirect influences towards religious belief.

Within sociological explanations for events, causal agency is recognized as a solely functional component. Per Manicas (2009, p. 3), ‘at the heart of social science explanation is the idea of a social mechanism with persons as causal agents.’ Conversely, when supernatural reality and agency is acknowledged, such as within a *sui generis* view of religion, causal agency includes persons within socio-culture as influential, but also potentially inhabits supernatural personal agency (e.g., a transcendent, personal, intentional God) who by His own nature possesses causative powers to interact within circumstances, mental and physical events, and states of being to bring about belief and religious conversion. This inclusive perspective extends beyond structuration theories, as advanced by Giddens (1994) and others, appreciating dynamic mutual dependence and interaction of structure and agency within individual and/or societal belief formation, reinforcement and/or transformation within a basic social constructionism paradigm. Rather, this conception and method of religious conversion allows for transcendent agency as inclusive in causative influences. It allows room for converts reporting a ‘real God’ who acted on their behalf to bring about their conversion or that belief was justified for more than functional motivation.

Therefore, this research confirms critical realism in acknowledging a mind-independent reality that exists regardless of our beliefs or stories. This reality can and does inform our beliefs about reality, our world, and ourselves. Ontological structural essences also exist upon which social reality is constructed. Further, this research confirms social constructionism in the recognition of human limitations, needs, and biases in our knowledge, understanding, expression and embodiment of beliefs, and the reality of biographical constructionism and the transformational nature of persons and narrative over time. That is, there is an unchanging objective reality and grounding for beliefs, but a changing subjective reality for persons and their stories over time.

5.5. Research Method

As religious conversion is a complex entity in its own right, its research warrants investigative tools appropriate to the task. While an appreciation for the complexity of religious conversion has grown in recent years, including recent mandate for multi-disciplinary conversion studies, research beyond single disciplines has been sparse; or, within disciplines, mixed-methodology rarer still. Belzen (2010) confirms that religion involves highly variable actions and experiences requiring interdisciplinary explanations in order to integrate knowledge with other fields. Mixed-method assessment provides maximal capacity and scope of investigation and is justified in this research.

The mixed-method approach allows for integration of subjective and objective lines of investigation. Mutual influence between two research perspectives creates complementarities and leads to an integrative explanatory framework, per Morris, et al. (1999). Combined explanations provide a rich account, creating synergy and mutual stimulation towards fostering greater understanding of subject matter under investigation. Onwegbuzie (2012) strongly advocates a mixed methodology approach, away from purist extremes of either quantitative or qualitative methods towards a new theoretical and methodological space which he calls 'the radical middle'. In his view, integration allows the best chance of answering specific research questions particularly when using computer-assisted data analysis software programs. He counters the perception that mixed research compromises theoretical commitments and assumptions; rather, it affirms philosophical beliefs and allows laterality, respecting individual epistemological presuppositions, beliefs and values. This call for interdisciplinary analysis of religious conversion coheres with other leading contemporary conversion scholars (Rambo, Farhadian, et al).

The primary goal of this research is to determine whether Substance influences (belief content and spiritual experiences) play a role in motivating religious conversion among an educated Atheist population. Function influences (socio-cultural, experiential, existential, and emotional elements) are also considered in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of

a ‘thick’ understanding conversion within this unique population. In order to more fully understand the multi-faceted influences of conversion, a mixed method protocol, including narrative analysis, was used for this research. Survey and interview tools were constructed to answer thesis questions:

- B1. The presence, timing, and role of Function and Substance at Atheism, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages for conversion from Atheism to Christianity through quantitative survey and qualitative semi-structured interview measures; and, whether Substance warrants inclusion in conversion as part of a complex, integrated phenomenon.
2. The presence, timing, and role of Function and Substance during narrative analysis as well as presence and nature of biographical reconstruction from pre-metanarrative to post-metanarrative in converts’ stories.

5.5.1. Non-Randomized Sampling and Researcher Bias

Research sampling is the process of choosing a part of the population to represent the whole. Although random sampling is ideal, true random samples are rare due to theoretical, feasible, or practical considerations (Kriska et al., 2013, Etikan et al. 2016b). Alternatively, non-random or non-probability sampling involves acquiring samples available to or selected by the researcher (Naderifar et al., 2017) Generally speaking, non-randomized sampling is easier, faster, and cheaper to obtain than randomized sampling and is useful when the targeted population is very large or when the researcher has limited resources, time, and workforce or when generalization is not in view (Wilson, 2014, Etikan et al., 2016a, Etikan et al., 2016b). Despite these advantages, non-randomized sampling does not allow for generalization from the sample to the targeted population. As subjective methods are used to decide which elements and persons are included in the sample, this subjectivity possesses an inherent bias and potentially impedes the researcher’s ability to draw inferences about a population. There can be discrepancies between the sample and target populations causing inability to generalize. The researcher has limited assurance that the sample is representative of the population or elements under research and can only make a statement about the sample itself rather than infer towards the targeted population (Kriska et al., 2013, Wilson, 2014, Etikan et al., 2016a, Panacek, 2007) In light of these limitations, researchers are encouraged

to be transparent regarding their own sampling procedures so that the research can be properly understood (Jha, 2017). Panacek (2007) recognizes even the best non-randomized samples may be biased. In order to potentially decrease the bias, he recommends use of statistical analysis (such as regression or analysis of covariance) to adjust for imbalanced variables in the research.

Various types of non-randomized sampling have been effectively used in social science research, including but not limited to convenience sampling, snowball sampling, and purposive sampling. Convenience samples are the most common type of non-random sampling, most frequently used in quantitative studies with a goal towards reaching a breadth rather than a depth of understanding (Panacek, 2007, Etikan et al., 2016a). Convenience sampling accesses members of the population who are available to the researcher using existing relationships to identify participants who are available to participate in the study (Naderifar et al., 2017, Valerio et al., 2016). Convenience sampling selects easily accessible cases until the desired number of targeted sampling is reached and relies on data collection from population members. No inclusion conditions are identified prior to the selection of subjects. (Wilson, 2014, Dudovskiy, 2018) More specifically, it is sampling whereby members of a target population that meet certain practical criteria (such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate) are included for the purpose of the study (Etikan et al. 2016a). According to Kriska et al. (2013), all study human participant samples are convenience samples to some degree in light of the ethical consideration which make participation voluntary and financial limits which make pure random sampling exorbitantly expensive.

Convenience samples have been used in social sciences to make advances in applied research and have value even when the data is not a truly random population sample (Kriska et al., 2013). Advantages include simplicity and ease of research, shortened duration of data collection, inexpensive implementation, and use in pilot studies and hypothesis generation. Shortcomings of convenience sampling are the high vulnerability to generating a biased

sample, a high level of sampling error, homogeneous sampling, the potential of skewed results, limited generalizability, and overall decreased research credibility (Dudovskiy 2018, Etikan et al., 2016a, Valerio et al., 2016, Fricker, 2011)

Snowball sampling is a method or variant of convenience sampling (Naderifar et al. 2017, Panacek, 2007). Most frequently used in qualitative research, snowball sampling or the ‘chain method’ is an informal sample generated through a few people recommending others and so on until the desired quota is reached and is based on a referral approach where a small number of individuals with specific characteristics recruit others with these characteristics from their networks or community. It is a process in which the first subjects are drawn by convenience and these subjects then recruit people they know to participate and so forth. Generally, a social bond exists between the initial sample and others in the same target population, allowing a series of referrals to be made within a circle of acquaintances (Kriska et al., 2013, Valerio et al., 2016, Atkinson, 2000). Snowball sampling is suitable when the population is hard-to-reach or hidden and locating participants poses difficulties for the researcher. It is appropriate when the focus of study requires knowledge of insiders to locate people for the study (Etikan et al., 2016b, Naderifar et al., 2017, Valerio et al. 2016, Dusek et al., 2014, Atkinson, 2000). Considered the weakest method of sampling, snowball sampling generates selection-biased samples because respondents generally refer other respondents who have characteristics or outlooks similar to themselves rather than truly representative of the population. It is also impossible to determine sampling error or make inference about the population on the samples obtained (Naderifar et al., 2017, Etikan et al., 2016b, Atkinson 2000, Valerio et al., 2016, Fricker, 2011).

In purposive sampling, the researcher applies their own criteria when defining their sample and selecting individuals as part of their study. Ritchie et al. (2003) defines this sampling approach as a strategy where ‘members of a sample are chosen with a purpose to represent a location or type in relation to the criterion’. More targeted than convenience sampling, subjects are selected by the investigator to meet a specific purpose using both

inclusion and exclusion criteria such as demographic parameters, clinical characteristics, geographic considerations, and temporal setting. The researcher has specific requirements for the sample and selects subjects who meet such criteria and concentrates on people with particular characteristics who will better be able to participate in the research due to the qualities they possess. The researcher decides what needs to be known and finds people who are willing and able to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience (Valerio et al., 2016, Panacek, 2007, Dusek et al., 2104). Homogeneous sampling is a form of purposive sampling focusing on candidates who share similar traits or specific characteristics, focusing on their similarity and how it relates to the topic being researched in order to reach a depth of understanding (Etikan et al., 2016a). Purposive sampling is desirable when the known characteristic is to be studied intensively. The main advantage of this approach is the ability to critically think and define the parameters of the population that is intended to be studied at an early stage (Miles and Huberman, 1994) as well as the ability to focus the criterion and achieve a depth of understanding of the issue at hand. For Naderifar et al. (2017), the purpose of qualitative research is to gain this deeper understanding of a phenomenon rather to generalize the findings. Subjects are selected based on study purpose with the expectation that each participant will provide unique and rich information of value to the study. Disadvantages of purposive sampling include the potential for researcher bias due to creating a sample based on subjective judgment which can lead to skewed results. This leads to another drawback, the problem of generalization. Since subjectivity is involved, generalizing from the sampled to the target population is precarious at best due to researcher bias. However, continued research, model testing, research comparison, and ongoing modification can lead to accumulation of knowledge and confidence in the data. Conclusions can be made with limited populations in a limited way. Findings can then be further assessed through continued research to work towards generalization. (Kriska et al., 2013)

Addressing the thesis questions within this research, both snowball and purposive sampling methods were used in combination with self-selection. These methods allowed for

locating a relatively hard-to-find population with specific demographic, temporal, accessibility, and personal criterion (naturalistic atheists who had converted to Christianity in contemporary Western countries). However, methodological limitations were clearly in view in conducting research with non-random sampling. Within this thesis, the potential towards generalization of the findings is recognized as restricted to the presenting research. Due to the social connections, conservative religious, and intellectual contexts in which the sample population was accessed, the homogeneity of the sampling towards a religiously conservative, intellectually-driven population potentially skews the results and prevents generalization beyond observations made for this particular group. Regardless, as Kriska et al. (2013) acknowledges, the findings herein may be compared to contemporary and future study and perhaps be considered in the access of knowledge in understanding atheist conversion to Christianity over time.

5.5.2. Research Study Participant Criteria and Selection

Participants in this qualitative research project were self-identified as naturalistic Atheists who changed from a prior disbelief in any supernatural reality towards belief in the conception and reality of God as identified by classical Christianity. They were adults, age 18 or older, without apparent cognitive impairment or learning disabilities living in Western society (e.g., United States, United Kingdom, Australia). Targeted number of participants for the research study was determined to be a minimum of fifty (50) subjects in order to gain sufficient variety of experiences and allow saturated trends to develop and emerge from the data.¹⁰² For comparison, in the National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper (2012), ‘How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough?’ Patricia and Peter Adler recommended ‘loosely 30 subjects’ for a qualitative medium-sized study (ranging from 1-60), stating, ‘This medium size subject pool offers the advantage of penetrating beyond a very small number of people without imposing the hardship of endless data gathering’ (Baker, 2012, pp. 4-5).¹⁰³

¹⁰² For this study, the researcher’s supervisor recommended the minimum number of fifty subjects.

¹⁰³ EDWARDS, S. E. B. A. R. 2012. How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough? *National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper*. National Centre for Research Methods. Experts Patricia A. Adler, University of Colorado and Peter Adler,

The only requirement for inclusion in the study was each subject's self-identification as one who held a prior belief in a naturalistic form of Atheism and currently held belief in Christianity. No condition for selection apart from this sole criterion was applied (i.e., education level, post-conversion commitment level, etc.). Research subjects were identified through individual public expression of conversion through writing, ministries, published articles, books, social relationships, and/or social media. Specifically, they were located through social media (e.g., on Facebook pages of Atheist/Christian discussion groups) (2/50; 0.04%), internet articles (6/50; 12.0%), books (2/50; 0.04%), church group (1/50; 0.02%), referred from friends (25/50; 50.0%), and referred from an apologetics ministry (15/50; 30.0%). Once identified, potential participants were recruited through direct contact via email or indirect contact via networking and/or referral via snowball sampling. Each candidate was contacted through email using appropriate introductory communication as approved by the University of Birmingham.

One hundred and one (101) potential study participants were invited to engage in the research project; seventy-three (73) subjects agreed to participate in the research as indicated both through informal (verbal agreement) and formal means (signing a consent form); however, only fifty-four (54) total questionnaires were completed from September 26, 2014 through February 7, 2015. Four participants were excluded from the study due to either lack of research protocol completion (i.e., two subjects did not participate in the interview – one was simply non-compliant; and, another de-converted and withdrew from interviewing); or, lack of subject compliance with research definition of Atheist and/or Christian for purposes of this study (i.e., one subject self-identified during the interview as a pantheist rather than naturalistic Atheist during the pre-conversion 'Atheist Stage'; another was disqualified due to his geographical location / South Africa as deemed as inappropriate for consideration of

University of Denver stated they 'have conducted, written about, and taught qualitative research methods at the graduate and undergraduate levels for 30 years, have lectured on the topic at conferences and workshops all over the world, and edited the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* for nearly a decade, feel comfortable weighing in on a discussion of how many qualitative interviews is enough.' Their recommendation in advising graduate students is to aim for a sample of loosely around 30. http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/4/how_many_interviews.pdf

Western culture in a strict sense). The targeted number of participants for this study reached fifty (50) subjects who agreed via formal written consent and completed both a confidential online questionnaire followed by a recorded interview with the researcher. Participants ranged from 22 to 73 years of age; mean age of participant at survey completion was 41.14 years old. Ratio of male to female subjects was approximately 4:1 with 40 males (82.0%)/10 females (20.0%). SoGoSurvey monitored number of email invitations sent and delivered, percentage of invitations read as well as the response rate.

5.5.3. Data Collection Protocol

Once initial contact by the principal investigator was made and potential subject(s) expressed interest, an Information Sheet explaining the parameters, procedures and expectations of the research were provided to them along with an informed Consent form.¹⁰⁴ Informed consent is ‘a process’ which ‘includes both informing prospective participants of what their participation in the research will likely entail and obtaining their written agreement to participate’ (Cone, 2006, pp. 145-146).¹⁰⁵ Subjects were informed on the Information Sheet that no financial compensation for participation in the research study was granted and, by signature, agreed to this arrangement. While there were no direct financial benefits from individual participation, the information obtained from the study helped to influence current social science research towards a more comprehensive understanding and investigation of religious conversion. Pre- and post- correspondence was conducted with each interviewee with language approved by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee.¹⁰⁶

After each subject agreed to the Information Sheet and consented to participate in the research study, an emailed invitation and link was provided to access and complete the online

¹⁰⁴ See Appendix for copies of the research Information Sheet and Consent form.

¹⁰⁵ FOSTER, J. D. C. A. S. L. 2010. *Dissertations and Theses from Start to Finish, Psychology and Related Fields*, Washington DC, American Psychological Association. ‘Minimal essential elements’ include description of the study and its purpose, a description of what the participant will be asked to do and how long it will take, the potential risks and benefits, and a statement regarding voluntary participation and withdrawal without penalty, reassurance of confidentiality, contact information, statement regarding compensation, availability of study results, signature of participant.

¹⁰⁶ See Appendix for copies of correspondence as approved by the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee.

SoGoSurvey ‘University of Birmingham Religious Conversion Questionnaire.’¹⁰⁷ Following completion of the online questionnaire, subjects participated in a confidential interview with the principal investigator. The interviews were conducted in person if logistically possible with goals directed towards encouraging authenticity and clarity, optimizing conversion account as well as creating respectful, dynamic interpersonal dialogue. However, if personal interview was not possible due to geographical distance, the interview occurred with videoconferencing via Skype (also allowing for the advantage of visual cues via facial expression and body language as well vocal and linguistic cues). Finally, if Skype was unavailable or at the participant’s request, phone interviews were conducted. Throughout the interview, the researcher developed a rapport with the participants, actively listening and responding with appropriate comment(s) and/or follow-up questioning.

Skype is considered a VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) mediated technology providing users with a way to send voice and video across the internet in a synchronous, real-time connection without the need for additional equipment, and is becoming more commonly used within academic research (Lo lacono, et al., 2016, pp. 1-2). Due to its increased accessibility and use, researchers have considered the ethics, methodology, and efficacy of Skype interviewing in qualitative research. As an alternative or supplemental approach to interviewing, Skype allows the researcher to reap similar or improved benefits to traditional face-to-face interviews in qualitative research. Documented advantages of Skype over face-to-face interviewing include low cost, ease and flexibility of time and access through overcoming geographical/distance and logistic issues, increasing participation range and rates, and live synchronous video feed. The researcher and researched remain in a ‘neutral yet personal’ location without a sense of imposition for the researcher or the researched. Skype preserves a ‘face-to-face’ experience while preserving flexibility and private space elements (Hanna, 2012, Janghorban, 2014, Lo lacono, 2016). Bargh, et al. (2002, p. 45) have argued

¹⁰⁷ See Appendix for copy of the SoGoSurvey online questionnaire.

the anonymity of online interaction increases rather than decreases authentic self-presentation as compared to face-to-face interviews. They conclude, an 'important and unique [quality] of Internet (compared to face-to-face) communication is that it facilitates the expression and effective communication of one's 'true self' to new acquaintances outside of one's established social network, which leads to forming relationships with them'.

Deakin and Wakefield (2014, 607) agree with Skype's usefulness as a supplemental or replacement tool for face-to-face interviewing. Its innovation, ease, cost- and time-effectiveness, and versatility for research has made the use of video in social science research more commonplace, particularly in light of providing the opportunity to talk with otherwise inaccessible participants. From their experience, 'Skype should also be seriously considered as a favoured choice in interviewing methodology...the only differentiation between Skype interviewees and face-to-face interviewees was geographical proximity'. Further, they (2014) assert that the quality of responses gained through online research is comparable to responses produced by more traditional methods and encourage Skype as an equal rather than secondary choice of interviewing method. F.C. Carolyn (2001) investigated and compared face-to-face interviewing against computer-mediated interviewing and confirmed online interviewing as a viable alternative particularly when time, financial restraints or geographical boundaries limit an investigation. Further, the use of Skype potentially increases the validity of an investigation through triangulation of the datasets through additional online data.

Limitations of Skype usage include inability to fully observe the participant's body language, the (in)ability of participants to access and/or use technology (dropped calls and pauses, inaudible segments), potential difficulty building rapport, possible lack of trust in using video when talking about sensitive issues, and ease of last-minute drop-outs (Lo Lacono 2106, Seitz, 2016). However, Lo lacono (2016) reported no problem with making, maintaining, or reclaiming rapport, even when the Skype call was interrupted by a loss of connection. They contend that rapport depends more on research topic as well as

participant's and interviewer's personalities.¹⁰⁸ The inability to see the full body position and gesturing can be overcome, per Lo Iacono, through 'careful listening' to the participant's voice and 'careful looking' at their facial expressions, head and shoulders to pick up non-verbal cues. Seitz (2016) found the quality of Skype interviews to be affected by the research topic, aim, and interview questions. Questions of a personal nature may pose more difficulty due to perception of Skype as an emotional barrier, causing a loss of connection and intimacy as compared to in-person interviews. However, less sensitive issues seemed less affected by suspicions (of privacy violation) and emotional awkwardness. Within this research, Skype was effectively used as the primary mode for conducting interview due to flexibility, broadened geographical scope, virtual 'face-to-face' contact, and affordability.

5.6. Mixed-Method Protocol

5.6.1. Quantitative Data Analysis (Surveys)

Quantitative research explains a phenomenon or tests a hypothesis by collecting numerical data that are statistically analyzed. It measures social reality through a deductive, formalized, impersonal, independent process with its ultimate goal to generalize the truth found in population samples. Survey research is one type of quantitative research used to measure characteristics, beliefs and attitudes of a population (Sukamolson, 2010).¹⁰⁹ Quantitative tools deduce hypotheses from an existing theory and, for Charmaz (2014), seldom leading to new theory construction. In this research, an online survey was constructed for a narrowed population (educated Atheist converts to Christianity) to determine the *what* (description, substance/ function content), *how* (process) and *why* (causal motivations) of religious conversion. The survey was developed through the structure provided by SoGoSurvey (www.SoGoSurvey.com), allowing for individualized design features in its creation. This method was chosen due to its easy accessibility for globally-located

¹⁰⁸ LO IACONO, V., SYMONDS, P. & BROWN, D. H. K. 2016. Skype as a Tool for Qualitative Research. *Sociological Research Online*, 21, 1-15. In their view, there are certain situations in which offline face-to-face interviews can produce less effective and less rich data collection than using Skype video or telephone (such as with 'shy people').

¹⁰⁹ SUKAMOLSON, S. 2010. Fundamentals of Quantitative Research. *Language Institute* [Online]. Other types of quantitative research include correlational, experimental, and causal-comparative research, per Sukamolson.

respondents, aesthetic appeal, flexibility, as well as its descriptive analysis and reporting capabilities.¹¹⁰ Following consent form completion, a link was forwarded via email allowing personal access to the online questionnaire. Each respondent accessed and completed the online questionnaire through SoGoSurvey, answering 33 questions regarding: (1) demographic data (questions 1, 3, 5; date of birth, biological sex, geographic location, level of education, persons in the home, and years-post-conversion); (2) personal religious history (questions 4, 6; family religious history, chronological religious history); (3) Atheist Stage: Atheistic perspectives on God and the Christian religion (questions 7-11, 13); strength of, confidence in, reasons for, and reflection of pre-conversion Atheistic worldview (questions 12, 14-16, 24); (4) pre-conversion perceived openness towards and pursuit of Christianity (or lack thereof) (questions 17-20); and, (5) pre-conversion influences towards or against Christianity and/or Atheism (questions 21-23, 25-28). The survey also included questions regarding Substance and/or Function motivations towards the (6) Catalyst Stage (questions 17, d j, n, o, 18-23, 26 j, m; and, 27c), (7) Conversion Stage (questions 27h, I; 19-31); and, (8) Post-conversion perspectives (on the ‘knowability’ of God (question 30); confidence in the truth of their new worldview (question 31); open text responses describing summary of conversion from Atheism to Christianity (question 32); and, their opinion regarding ‘the most effective way to influence an Atheist towards Christianity’ (question 33). A sample of the online questionnaire is included in the Appendix for review.

The survey used multiple selection check boxes (including both randomized and non-randomized responses), rating scales, limited character text boxes, and pre-structured demographics. Survey response formatting included closed-, open-, and scaled responses. Although preconceived categories shaped the scope of questioning, a wide range of responses options in both Substance and Function categories was included. The questionnaire structure also granted space for subjects’ self-generated responses through open-text formatting, as

¹¹⁰ In addition, SoGoSurvey is provided pro bono to PhD researchers.

needed. Completion time ranged from 30-60 minutes. Following completion of all surveys, analysis was conducted in order to determine significance of Substance and Function content as related to three stages of religious conversion (Atheism, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages). SoGoSurvey findings were downloaded into Excel for descriptive analysis, and subsequently transferred into IBM SPSS software version 23¹¹¹ for statistical analysis.

5.6.2. Qualitative Data Analysis (Interviews)

Qualitative method includes interviews as well as observation, case studies, and ethnographic research. Qualitative data collection and analysis uses an inductive approach towards obtaining information from the research participant and, entails a subjective, informal, interactive, emergent process (Sukamolson, 2010). Qualitative research focuses on manifest (visible, obvious) and latent (underlying meaning) content, developing categories through induction (Burla, et al., 2008). Baylor et al. (2005, p. 398) describes qualitative research as study whereby:

...researchers seek to describe the common experiences as well as the range of different experiences within the group. It is understood that people will have multiple perspectives on these experiences, and that each individual is the expert in how he or she interprets the meaning of the experience for himself or herself. The product of a phenomenological study is a detailed account that provides the reader with an authentic understanding of the meaning of that experience in the words of the persons who have lived that experience.

For Sukamolson (2010), the goals of qualitative research are to understand a certain phenomenon through in-depth exploration, to examine meaning of particular events and circumstances, and to discover new insights and unexpected variables in the development of new theory. Within this research, interviews were used as a means of qualitative data collection of individual religious conversion stories. Interviews provide ‘the most suitable unit of analysis’ in a qualitative approach in order to perceive the whole of the content and context as well as its meaningful parts (words, sentences and paragraphs) (Lundman and Grandeheim, 2004, p. 106). For Sandelowski (1991, pp. 162-164), narrative stories include a

¹¹¹ SPSS – originally denoted Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, although its use has now expanded beyond the social sciences to other fields of study.

temporal ordering of events (past, present and future), within an effort to make something out of those events in a personally, historically, and culturally coherent, plausible manner. Narratives describe life stories, contexts and significance of events, and the function certain life episodes serve in individuals' lives. The researcher's role was to determine 'why something happened' via supportable events, actions, and intentions as well as providing an adequate explanation of the narrative outcome. Within this study, the primary interview goal was to determine the main components affecting the process, motivation towards, and effect of religious conversion. In light of this objective, interview questions were formulated to find and generate data, elicit thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards their cultural, social, emotional, experiential, educational/intellectual and spiritual/religious influences in their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In other words, the researcher sought to provide 'rich data' and 'thick descriptions' which were 'detailed, focused, and full, revealing participants' views, feelings, intention, and actions as well as the contexts and structures of their lives'. As a researcher, the aim was 'to see this world as our research participants do – from the inside' (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 23-24).

The interviews were semi-structured based upon pre-formulated questions and in response to the prior submitted questionnaire. The interview protocol probed a broadened range of functional and/or substantive factors potentially contributing to the development of, holding, and changing of beliefs as in religious conversion through first person narrative. Specifically, questions tapped into influences guiding Atheistic belief (Atheist Stage), openness towards change (Catalyst Stage), conversion to Christianity (Conversion Stage), and life after conversion (Post-Conversion Stage). The primary researcher conducted every interview to ensure consistency of interviews. Pre-established questions were pursued with all participants, supplemented by pivotal themes, events, and circumstances as personally relevant to each person's conversion narrative. Secondary questions were raised depending upon the nature and topics of interaction in order to allow for clarification and/or spontaneous themes to emerge. Flexibility was granted in an attempt to gain a broadened, deepened

understanding of the basic external influences which contributed to conversion as well as the participant's internal perspectives and attitudes which were present and/or shifting throughout the process. This adaptability permitted the researcher to follow leads that emerge, to construct new questions and follow influences as raised through the narrative.

In this study, semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 30-90 minutes in duration based upon participants' conversational style and personality allowing for the respondent to emphasize areas of import relative to his/her personal narrative. The researcher attended to pragmatic cues towards participants' openness and/or reserved tendencies, respectful of time and privilege of interaction. Data collection via interviews was conducted from September 27, 2014 through March 20, 2015, approximately six months in total. The interviews were recorded using an iPad with an ALON Dictaphone application allowing for subsequent storage and replay for transcription onto a Word document. To ensure secure storage and confidentiality, the interviews were saved on an encrypted flash drive Integral Crypto FIPS 197 and transcribed verbatim by the primary investigator. The transcribed data was transcribed into NVivo for Mac computerized software through which themes and sub-themes arising from the interviews were categorized and coded for analysis. As religious conversion is a complex phenomenon, qualitative analysis provided adequate method for comprehensive analysis of its multi-dimensional causes and processes. Within this research, individual narratives as well as common trends and redundant patterns observed among different conversions were analyzed. Qualitative analysis goals included identifying commonalities and differences among participant experiences, determining Substance and Function influences in the conversion process, and establishing patterns and themes through descriptive and inferential analysis.

5.6.3. Qualitative Narrative Analysis (Interviews)

Based on the literature review of narrative analysis and theoretical models, a proposed model for religious conversion narrative analysis was formulated. Areas of biographical reconstruction were established as targeted variables for analysis among a sample group of

interview narratives. Function areas included context and community, volitional will, experience, identity, purpose and meaning, and sense-making emotional. Substance areas included (canonical) text, sense-making intellectual, and spirituality. Narratives were analyzed across religious conversion pattern groups as established through prior qualitative analysis until saturation occurred.¹¹² According to Fusch (2015), data saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study, the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and further coding is no longer feasible. A total of 23 transcribed interviews underwent narrative analysis. Using NVivo 12, each narrative was thematically coded per category and per stage of conversion.¹¹³ Once coded, biographical narrative shifts were observed in each category per narrative until patterns emerged demonstrating a saturation of common biographical reconstruction shifts. Each narrative was analyzed as to presence or absence +/- of Function and/or Substance areas per stage of conversion and recorded in Excel. This was done – not in order to provide quantitative data – but to visually demonstrate the integrated nature of biographical reconstruction through the conversion process. Charts were constructed to reflect narrative *what*, *why*, and *how* of conversion for each individual narrative by showing areas of influence throughout each emplotted story. Language samples identifying biographical shifts per category and stage were identified for each individual narrative as well as to serve as examples. An integrated Narrative Analysis Memo was constructed for each individual narrative demonstrating biographical reconstruction and change from pre- to post-metanarrative. Reflexive comments were recorded throughout the narrative analysis process.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Narrative analysis conversion pattern groups: F1 – 1 narrative; F2 – 8 narratives (saturated group); F3 – 2 narratives; F4 – 2 narratives; F5 – 2 narratives; S1 – 3 narratives; S2 – 2 narratives; S3 – 2 narratives; S4 – 1 narrative; Function Catalyst Narrative subtotal = 15 narratives; Substance Catalyst Narrative subtotal = 8 narratives.

¹¹³ See Appendix for list of narrative thematic codes and an example of coded narrative.

¹¹⁴ See Appendix for samples of integrated NA Memos, Narrative Charts, and Reflexive comments.

5.7. Software Data Analysis Programs

Mixed-method research required distinct software programs for quantitative data analysis (surveys) and qualitative data analysis (interviews).

5.7.1. SoGoSurvey and IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)

Quantitative Data analysis of the survey included both independent and integrative components. For descriptive analysis of the questionnaire only, SoGoSurvey provided descriptive quantitative analysis data in the form of response percentages or scaling per question. In order to analyze research data in depth, IBM SPSS, a standard computer software data analysis program in the social sciences, was utilized. A consulting statistician performed statistical data analysis generated from quantitative survey and qualitative interview (patterns) determining significance of Substance and Function variables at three stages of conversion; and, performed triangulation of survey and interview data.

5.7.2. NVivo 10 for Mac and Microsoft Excel

For qualitative data analysis, Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) software NVivo 10 for Mac was selected following comparison of NVIVO, Dedoose, and SPSS. Training in NVivo 10 for Mac was accomplished through instructional books, online tutorials, and interactive online and in-person consulting sessions.¹¹⁵ Qualitative data collection was analyzed through NVivo for Mac, Microsoft Excel, and IBM SPSS software analysis programs. Following transcription of individual interviews by the principal investigator, the documents were uploaded into QSR International's NVivo 10 for Mac software analysis program. Thematic codes were developed during initial analysis of each interview. Throughout the first round of coding, basic parent and child nodes (main and sub-categories) emerged in response to narrative themes wrought by the data. Individual transcripts were initially coded using an increasing diversity of nodes as the collective data

¹¹⁵ Initiated training with University of Birmingham's NVivo Module 1 (online) followed by individual session with University of Birmingham consultant; Viewed YouTube NVivo for Mac QSR Training instructional videos; Participated in two online QSR International training courses: (1) Fundamentals of NVivo 10 for Mac and (2) Moving On with NVivo 10 for Mac; Referenced Pat Bazeley, K. J.'s book (2013), *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVIVO*. London, Sage for ongoing instruction.

across the transcripts accumulated. In order to ensure accuracy and consistency, a second round of coding using the more extensive listing of nodes was initiated for 29/50 interviews. However, further NVivo 10 for Mac training prompted a notable restructure towards elimination of duplicate thematic nodes with the goal towards optimizing analysis. All fifty interviews were then recoded with the revised, stabilized parent/child node structure.¹¹⁶ The open text written narratives of conversion provided by each subject in the questionnaires were also uploaded into the NVivo 10 for Mac program into respective memos linked to each participant and similarly coded in an effort to integrate both qualitative and quantitative components within the data analysis.

Emerging religious conversion patterns were developed based upon individual subject narratives of religious conversion. The role and predominance of Substance and Function influences informed these preliminary processes (e.g., Substance component as primary; Function component as secondary, minimal or absent). These patterns were recorded in a Research Patterns memo within the NVivo 10 for Mac program; and, individual narratives were placed in these tentative, initial patterns until more thorough, complete analysis of the transcripts was accomplished. Immersion in the data yielded closeness to the material, allowing for the researcher to make sense and draw meaningful conclusions from the data (Burnard, 1991). The dynamic process of analysis allowed for movement between the whole and parts of the text (Lundman and Grandeheim, 2004). The interviews yielded emerging themes within the stages of conversion. In preparation for triangulation of data, religious conversion patterns were quantified using Microsoft Excel.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ See Appendix for a listing of thematic codes.

¹¹⁷ The coding process entailed a series of steps: (a) interview theme nodes were cross-referenced with survey contents to demonstrate integration of similar themes and recorded on a word document; (b) survey contents were downloaded into an Excel spread sheet with each survey question and answer choice assigned an input value; (c) the Excel spread sheet was imported into the NVivo program for compatibility, integration and coding; (d) compatible survey themes and key words were identified and coded using the NVivo text search query function; (e) key words were additionally coded in the interviews and memos for consistency; (f) coded survey key words were integrated and/or merged into pre-existing NVivo interview theme nodes. This integrated data allowed for comprehensive analysis, drawing forth emerging patterns through use of matrix queries to assess the quantitative surveys in conjunction with the qualitative interviews.

5.8. Ethical Responsibility, Reliability, and Validity

5.8.1. Ethical Responsibility

Ethical responsibility of the research project was assured, including the ethical conduct by the researcher to obtain an informed consent, avoiding deception and concealment, respecting the participant's right to decline or withdraw from participation in the study at any time. Each potential subject was granted an opportunity to ask questions or withdraw from the research process at any time without penalty.¹¹⁸ Care was taken to protect each participant, minimizing the risks of any social, emotional, or psychological harm or discomfort during information gathering and audio recording. The researcher created a safe, respectful conversational tone and environment as possible and by ensuring that strict confidentiality and anonymity was maintained and protected throughout and following the research study.¹¹⁹ To maintain confidentiality during data reporting and to provide a humanizing element to the data reporting, subjects were assigned pseudonyms correlative to respective birth year. Storage and access of both quantitative and qualitative data were protected. For the quantitative online surveys, the host SoGoSurvey houses a high-quality SSL (Secure Socket Layer) data encryption so that survey responses were encrypted during transmission in order to 'protect sensitive data and reassure participants that their data is safe'.¹²⁰ The investigator and supervisor(s) had sole access to the encrypted survey data.

No significant risk to the environment or society was anticipated or substantiated. The degree of risk for participation was minimal for each subject. The benefits for each

¹¹⁸ The Information Sheet provided to each subject stated regarding Participant Withdrawal: 'Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you change your mind, you are free to stop your participation and to have your data withdrawn without any reason up to the point of dissertation completion (2016).' 'Even if you have decided to take part, you are still free to cease your participation at any time and to have research data/information relating to you withdrawn without giving any reason.'

¹¹⁹ Survey and interview responses were regarded as strictly confidential. All data for analysis was anonymized. In reporting on the research findings, the names of any participants or the organization where they work were not revealed. At all times there was no possibility of individuals being linked with the data. All recordings of data on audio-equipment were safely stored on an encrypted flash-drive after transcription.

¹²⁰ SoGoSurvey assurance: 'SSL stands for Secure Socket Layer. It was originally developed by Netscape to protect information sent over the Internet from eavesdropping and corruption. It works through the encryption of data between Web browsers and Web servers. A URL with 'https,' means an SSL connection will be used, and almost all websites such as SoGoSurvey that ask you to log in also use an SSL connection. In survey technology, Secure Surveys with SSL Encryption are critical for maintaining participant privacy and information integrity.' <http://www.sogosurvey.com/our-guarantee/safe-harbor-and-data-security/>.

participant were judged to outweigh any risk as evidenced by near-complete compliance with the study (50/54; 92.6%) of those who began the protocol. Furthermore, the research findings promoted insight into and dialogue between those of diametrically opposed worldviews. The potential benefits for this research increased awareness, interaction with, and understanding (of self and others) of the multi-faceted aspects that influence religious conversion.

5.8.2. Integrity of Analysis – Reliability

In order to ensure integrity of study implementation and analysis, measures of validity and reliability were applied. Reliability of research determines the degree to which a research instrument produces consistent results over time and variety of conditions when/as replicated by another researcher. Consistency of measurement or stability of measure over a variety of conditions ideally obtain similar results (Drost, 2011). Reflexivity is warranted in this as in all academic research. Threats to reliability potentially derive from researcher or participant error and/or bias in the form of systematic or random errors. Within this research, primary issues identified as potentially informing alternative explanations of the survey and interview findings included: 1) Researcher presumptions potentially allowing theoretical bias to inform results; 2) Researcher error in the data collection and/or analysis phases of the research; and, 3) Participant error in providing accurate survey and/or interview responses due to a variety of logistic or other variables. These issues are briefly addressed below:

First, researcher presuppositions are unavoidable. The construction of a thesis presupposes a certain perspective of reality. In quantitative research, the investigator's role is minimized and/or neutralized due to the objective nature of the procedures; whereas, in qualitative research, the researcher's attitude, approach, and relationship towards the participants plays an inevitable role (Hood, 2010). The weaknesses of each method are counterbalanced by respective strength of the other (i.e., the inherent subjective, localized, insider, smaller yet 'thick, internalized description' of the ethnographer in qualitative analysis is balanced by the more objective, universalized, outsider, larger, external description

obtained through quantitative analysis). Whereas emic and etic perspectives each provide only half of the story, an integration of methodology provides a fuller narrative of the phenomenon at hand (Morris, 1999). For Manicas (2009), the qualitative researcher seeks to understand phenomena as well as the subject themselves, although he cautions that an absolutely objective, theory-neutral interpretation of either is out of reach. For him, reflexivity puts strong requirements on questions in interviewing, but does *not* require a positivist criterion of validity, reliability, and generalizability be satisfied in order to achieve adequate communication and understanding of the ‘other’s’ perception and position.

Within this study, the researcher attempted to avoid unintended hetero-interpretation in order to allow to gain understanding of religious conversion from the converts’ perspectives and sought in good faith to obtain full and relevant information from participating subjects. The primary investigator was an ‘outsider,’ having never been an Atheist yet was, in part, an ‘insider’ with respect to personal belief as a Christian. I did not make personal beliefs known to the subjects in order to maintain a neutral posture. However, this common ‘insider’ status aided in establishing rapport with and creating a safe, encouraging environment for subjects to fully tell their conversion stories. Susceptibility towards personal bias was kept in mind during data analysis, with attempts made to select narrative data with neutrality through conforming to pre-determined model and structure.

Second, in an effort to increase internal consistency and decrease researcher error throughout data collection and analysis, the primary researcher of this study engaged with all participants throughout the assessment process, including all interactions from initial contact to assessment and final correspondence. In survey construction, a wide range of Substance and Function response options were provided per question in order to allow for a balance of potential responses and in order to avoid research bias or outcomes. Further, internal consistency of inquiry was enhanced through length of survey construction as well as variety of questions assessing similar Function and/or Substance influences so as to allow for multiple responses to particular areas of questioning across inquiry. The primary researcher

conducted, transcribed and coded every interview to ensure consistency of interview structure and analysis. When engaging consultant(s) to assist with qualitative and quantitative analysis, the primary researcher actively participated in the analysis process. Agreement between the primary researcher and consultants were reached as to the integrity and internal consistency of analysis in both survey and interview tools. Research protocol was established to control for participant errors through clearly identifying intent, expectations, procedures, and parameters of the research study with pre-survey information and consent forms. Subjects were allowed time and preference in participating in survey and interview assessment in order to optimize participant responses.

Third, participant bias also poses a threat to reliability of the research in the giving of unintended false responses due to the risk of auto-biographical reconstruction. Research controlled for participant bias through providing secured anonymity, controlled private environment (as able) and safe, comfortable levels of dialogue engagement for interview interaction, allowing for honest, authentic narratives. Post-conversion stories can be generated and potentially re-imagined in light of a new reality as perceived in the mind of the convert. Significant shift in worldview and life experience, particularly embracing a new spiritual reality, can bring past circumstances into a different framework of understanding. As such, the interviewer sought to obtain from the interviewee as clear of remembrance of pre-conversion perceptions, experiences, and events as possible. Interestingly, participants in this study appeared quite sober minded in self-analysis and interpretation of personal history. However, due to the subjective nature of narratives, limitation in full, honest disclosure was expected. In order to counter the possible negative effect of compromised self-understanding and autobiographical reconstruction, an increased number of participants (50) was used in the study in order to ascertain larger patterns of movement from disbelief to belief.

Further, biographical reconstruction can be viewed as positive affirmation of convert taking on the new role and rhetoric of their religious faith. In fact, this research highlights various areas of transformation a convert experiences as revealed through conversion surveys

and narratives. In this light, auto-biographical reconstruction is expected and observed as evidence of religious conversion. The researcher attempted to allow each individual's narrative 'speak for itself' and simultaneously attempted to avoid skepticism and hetero-interpretation of and imposition upon the data. Each subject's self-reporting narrative, although drawn out through directed inquiry, was taken at face value for recording and analysis. Possible lapses in accurate recall of detail, if present in the data, are minimized in pattern identification due to the comprehensive pool of information gathered among fifty (50) subjects. Further detailed analysis of twenty-three (23) subjects demonstrated the transformational nature of conversion as shown through biographical reconstruction. The number and diversity of subjects allows for variance within the scope of religious conversion patterns, but also supports general trends. Unusual narratives demonstrated contrast and invited further inquiry and analysis as to the nature of deviation.

5.8.3. Integrity of Analysis – Validity

Research validity concerns whether we are measuring what we intend to measure as well as the effect of circumstances on our observations (Trochim, 2006). Construct validity of this research project - the extent and accuracy of this research in relationship to its intended measurement - was viewed as viable in light of the exploratory nature of this project. Using a combined critical realism / social constructionism approach allowed for a broadened investigation of the presence and relationship of Substance and Function with religious conversion, if any. In order to substantiate internal validity of the research at hand, data saturation was accomplished, the causal relationship between independent variables (Substance and Function) and dependent variable (religious conversion) were evaluated through survey and interview tools. Findings were compared through triangulation, demonstrating positive internal validity between the two measures. External validity determines the generalizability of the research and/or the causal relationships reported therein across other persons, settings and times (Drost, 2011). This research seeks does not seek generalization from the targeted population to religious conversion beyond these two groups.

However, the proposed Narrative Analysis Model for Religious Conversion may provide a generalizable framework outside of the narrowed population and scope of this study due to the nature of biographical reconstruction seemingly common among religious converts.

The question remains as to whether or not spirituality and religious beliefs (in addition to functional influences) are a viable part of religious conversion among an educated Atheist population. Results of the mixed-method study are provided in the following chapters, beginning with findings from the Atheist Stage.

5.9. Limitations of the study

This research studied a broadened range of variables potentially influencing conversion in order to avoid disciplinary bias, allow for a wider explanatory scope, and provide greater comprehension of a complex dynamic phenomenon. An expansive allowance for Function (i.e., cultural, social, emotional, existential, experiential) and Substance (i.e., rational/intellectual, spiritual experiential) contributors provided a more complete explanation of a dynamic process than isolated variable(s). Such a comprehensive undertaking possessed inherent difficulties. A mixed-method research protocol combined with fifty participants resulted in an enormous amount of analyzable data. Sophisticated software programs were utilized in the analysis of both interviews (i.e., NVivo) and surveys (i.e., SPSS) allowing for viable and reliable qualitative and quantitative assessment of primary conversion influences and patterns. However, limitations on potential secondary patterns and relationships were drawn in order to address the thesis question at hand (i.e., the presence, timing, and role of Substance and Function in conversion of Atheists to Christianity). The wealth of information obtained has not yet been utilized to its full potential (i.e., relationship between motivations for Atheism as related to motivations for conversion; analysis within functional influences (cultural, social, emotional, moral, existential, experiential); and/or analysis of Atheists' communication with Christians regarding Christianity; etc.). Regardless, research findings discussed herein warrant a fair hearing, not despite its broadened scope but because of it.

Further, survey construction did not allow for individualized priority of responses within questions. Therefore, judging 'most important' Substance and/or Function influences for individual participants was limited. Rather, queries often allowed for an open number of responses on particular questions in order to provide a wide scope of and accounting for functional and/or substantive influences. This structure provided general patterns for the whole group towards conversion, the focus of the thesis; prioritizing and/or rating responses could have provided more nuanced analysis. However, Function and/or Substance priorities were determined through directed semi-structured interviews and given weight through religious conversion patterning and quadrant analysis.

Education level of study participants most likely contributed to the strong positive presence of Substance in the conversion process. Research subjects' education level was above average as compared with either the average Western Atheist population or 'normal population'. This high level of education promoted value towards critical thinking in evaluating the rationality of held and/or considered beliefs as compared to the 'average Atheist'. Consequently, implications and generalization of this study may be limited to a college educated demographic rather than as reflective of the Atheistic culture as a whole. However, Western Atheism has not only been informed narrowly through the university setting but widely through socio-cultural influences, resulting in negative views towards and plausibility of religion, particularly Christianity. Thus, the role of education in the perspective of the Atheist or religious convert potentially serves as a key factor in future research.

Life stories and personal testimonies reflect the 'insider perspective' with the order, content, and emphasis as determined by the narrator to provide meaning and give an account of life events, thoughts, experiences, and attitudes. Conversion stories are stories of self-disclosure and transformation - and according to biographical reconstruction, are transformed over time. This emic perspective is honored as forthright, ethical and not intentionally

deceptive, although it is acknowledged that past memory and presenting interpretation change as increasingly seen within a new narrative through biographical reconstruction.

Lastly, as addressed earlier in this chapter in section 5.5.1., methodological limitations using non-randomized sampling prohibits generalization beyond the bounds of this investigative study.

6.0. QUANTITATIVE and QUALITATIVE ANALYSES: ATHEIST STAGE

6.1. Introduction

The research subjects in this study shared a common view of the nature of reality - only the natural and/or material world exists. No supernatural reality exists or interacts with the natural universe, informs human nature or the human experience. This baseline view, its influences and grounding were worthy of consideration in the lives of the respondents. Not only does it provide a foundational context preceding and informing religious conversion, but it also helps appreciate the extent and significance of transformation from naturalistic Atheism to Christianity. In order to establish a baseline of substantive and functional variables prior to religious conversion, the respondents' pre-conversion presumptions, belief, motivations, and influences were assessed through an online survey.

Quantitative descriptive research findings within this chapter are provided in partial response to thesis question B1 in determining the presence, timing and role of Substance and/or Function at the Atheist Stage using quantitative descriptive analysis. Results were based upon information obtained by study participants through their responses on the online SoGoSurvey tool 'University of Birmingham Religious Conversion Questionnaire'.¹²¹

Qualitative interview excerpts are included in support of quantitative survey findings.

Demographics of study participants, their Atheistic views towards God, Christianity and Christians, as well as self-reported functional and substantive causes of Atheism are included herein. Functional variables include macro- and micro-social influences along with experiential, emotional, existential, and/or moral motivations. Substantive variables include substantive intellectual as well as spiritual experiential influences.

¹²¹ See Appendix to view complete SoGoSurvey questionnaire.

6.1.1. Research Subject Demographics

Respondents in this study reported their country of origin, biological sex, level of education, and family structure. Geographically, all fifty (50) respondents in this research study live within six Western countries, including United States (33/50, 66%), United Kingdom (7/50, 14%), Canada (4/50, 8%), New Zealand/Australia (4/50, 8%), and France (2/50, 4%). Males comprise 80.0% (40/50) of research subjects in this study and females constituted 20.0% (10/50). Racial and ethnic self-identification were not solicited in the research process due to more primary considerations of geography and self-understanding of religious conversion from naturalistic atheism to Christianity. On informal observation, the majority of the sample group was predominantly white. Despite the recognized advantage of a confirming participants' race and ethnicity, obtaining self-report at the time of this writing would be problematic due to loss of accessible contact with some of the respondents.

Education among the respondents reflected a high level of achievement, including 'some college' (10/50; 20.0%), a college degree (20/50; 40.0%), a master's level college degree (13/50; 26.0%) or a PhD (7/50; 14.0%). Forty percent (20/50) hold a post-graduate degree and 80% (40/50) hold a bachelor's and/or post-graduate level degree.¹²² This population valued the intellectual credibility of their held beliefs (reported in section 6.2.2. of this chapter). Within this research, Atheists generally deemed themselves as 'rationally superior' than the average person (especially the religious believer), well-educated, scientifically minded, and advanced in intellect. In his interview, Joseph¹²³ stated:

I grew up thinking that religion is stupid, for the weak. It is something innately inherited from my mother, and possibly the idea, *I think a bit of a superiority complex, that Atheists are intellectually superior to believers*. So, you know, that kind of thing. I guess as a child from time to time I thought there must be some kind of god or something. But that was kind of rationalized away to some degree. [...] Even though I was a miserable teenager, *I have always had a high view of my intellect. And the one thing I could always lord over others was that I wasn't some stupid, crazy, religious nut job.*

¹²² For females in this study, 5/10; 50% completed 'some college' (two females) or hold a bachelor's degree (three females); 5/10 (50%) completed an advanced degree (two females hold a master's degree; three females hold a PhD).

¹²³ In order to maintain strict confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all subjects in this report.

Amanda affirmed an advanced intellectual self-perception:

Yeah. It really affected how I thought about the world, especially my evolutionary mindset. I was very conceited. I thought, ‘Well, *I’m smart, talented, and this and that. I’m definitely ahead of the pack here and so my thinking was that I’m more evolved than these [religious] people.*’

Due to their skeptical nature, they typically guarded against belief in superstitious non-reality. On interview, Justin described the influence his own natural rational inclinations pressed upon his bias against supernatural reality:

I would describe myself at that age as having no need for God. It was an *unnecessary complication that I didn’t have any evidence for*, and I was naturally quite skeptical, and I brought that into my Christianity as well. I’m naturally very skeptical of claims that people make. And, so, I’m not going to accept something necessarily on the basis of someone telling me, so I want to hear reasons for that being the case. And, if I don’t think they are persuasive, then I won’t accept it.

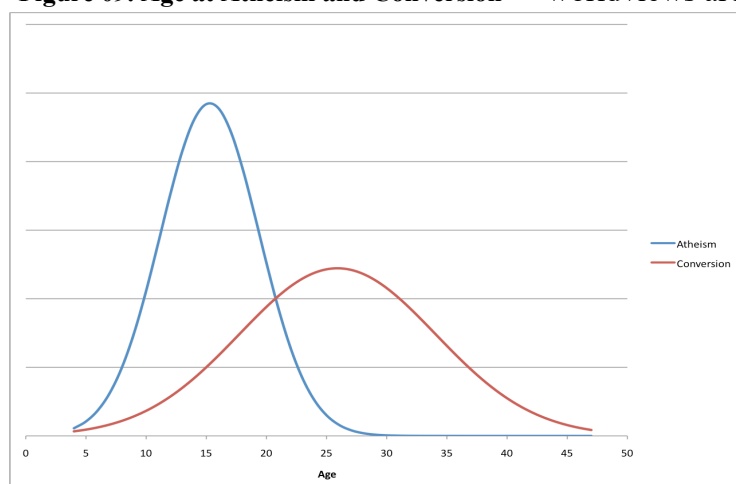
6.2. Declared Atheism and Atheistic Views

Research participants declared themselves Atheists at varying ages, held their perspectives with diverse levels of strength, confidence and satisfaction; and, reported wide-ranging pre-conversion views on God, Christianity, and Christians.

6.2.1. Age of Declared Atheism

Most former Atheists in this study declared Atheist identity and belief during adolescence. The average age was 15.30 years old (ranging from 0-23 years) when formative

Figure 09. Age at Atheism and Conversion worldviews are being questioned.¹²⁴ The average



number of years of professed Atheism was 10.6 years (ranging from 3-39 years). The average age at religious conversion was 25.90 years of age (ranging from 16-57 years predominantly

¹²⁴ Four subjects (4/50) reported themselves as Atheists from age 0 due to their self-perceived disbelief ‘as long as they could remember.’

between ages 18 and 31) when life perspectives are being solidified into adulthood. Average age of respondents at the time of the survey was 41.14 years of age (from 22-73 years).

In this study, the average number of years of professed Christianity post-conversion was 12.16 years (ranging from 1-42 years; SD = 10.94).¹²⁵ Other conversion narrative studies were reviewed to provide a frame of reference for this research, particularly regarding time elapse after conversion. In Hoskins's (2016) doctoral work on Muslim to Christian conversion, all but two of the 36 participants were Christians for approximately ten or more years at the time of their interview. Specifically, approximate years since conversion ranged from 5-20+ years to 'unknown' (5+ years, 2 participants; 10+ years, 13 participants; 15+ years, 15 participants; 20 years, 2 participants; unknown, 4 participants). Milton (2013) studied Pentecostal conversion by interviewing 30 adults between ages 20 and 86 years of age. The only indication regarding time post-conversion in her dissertation is 'time at church ranged from one year to individuals who had been part of the church's original founding group'.¹²⁶ Dufault-Hunter's (2012) doctoral work on conversion narratives with converts to Islam demonstrates inquiry as to time post conversion; however, she does not report findings in her published book, *The Transformative Power of Faith*.¹²⁷ Langston's (2018) recent study reviewed 111 pre-existing online convert narratives of 'ex-Atheist Christians', on average one to three paragraphs long. However, time post-conversion was not acknowledged because of the methodological limitations (inaccessibility of data due to lack of direct contact with the converts). Kahn's (2004) doctoral work testing Rambo's conversion model included

¹²⁵ Todd reported a sobering realization of the life decision he had made as an adolescent that might need reconsideration. He reflected, 'A pivotal moment for me was when I was, I don't remember where or when exactly, but I do remember at some point thinking to myself, 'I donned the label of Atheist when I was 17 years old. I put this label on myself. I made a decision for my life when I was 17 years old. *And here I am 27, basically taking the advice of a 17-year-old. I am putting my faith and my weight in a 17-year-old understanding of the world. And I could not let go of the foolhardiness of that realization.* I just couldn't. That was an inch I could not scratch. I just could not let go of that, and that helped crack the door to what I considered, actually having in its purest form, an open mind - not an open mind that people say these days when they say open mind. What they really mean is that you would consider my version of reality, not yours, but a true demilitarized zone, a neutral ground.'

¹²⁶ MILTON, G. 2013. *Understanding Pentecostal Conversion: An Empirical Study*. PhD, University of Birmingham. Telephone conversation with Dr. Milton confirmed lack of specific inquiry as to time post-conversion.

¹²⁷ DFAULT-HUNTER, E. E. 2012. *The Transformative Power of Faith: A Narrative Approach to Conversion*, Lanham, Maryland, Lexington Books. Attempted contact with Dr. Dufault-Hunter for clarification and information was unsuccessful.

110 participants, age range 25-84 years (mean age = 50.9). He reported the mean number of years post-conversion was 15.4 with a standard deviation of 16.7. Griffin Cook (2004) explored Christian conversion through interviewing ten adults, ages 30-70 with reported time post-conversion ranging between 2-13 years. Her doctoral work confirmed the enduring nature of conversion transformation observed in self-understanding, identity, beliefs, convictions, and lifestyle.

Other studies confirmed the stability of Christian conversion testimony despite time post-conversion. In Jindra et al.'s study (2012, pp. 16, 7) on Christian Conversion Narratives, 'time passed since conversion' was analyzed (along with other factors) as to its significance in the 'telling of Christian conversion narratives'. Fifty-nine students were interviewed, ranging in age from 18-39. Although time post-conversion was included in analysis, no specific relevant data was included in this area of research. However, their results confirmed, 'No significant correlations between age, denomination, *time passed since conversion*, and the way conversion narratives are told were found'. Further, 'in the data, in almost all the categories, some ways of telling the conversion story were dominant, and this, we contend, indicates the power of the overarching Christian narrative'. Yang et al. (1998, pp. 238-239) studied conversion narratives in Chinese conversion to evangelical Christianity. They obtained conversion stories through collecting more than one hundred personal testimonies through attending church gatherings, reading church application forms, magazines and newsletters in addition to conducting interviews with 'dozens' of church members in the Chinese Christian Church. Yang confirmed the validity and reliability of the conversion narratives despite their dating and range, stating, 'Because I had an extended period of fieldwork at the church, I observed some individuals going through the conversion process and interviewed them at various points in the process. These data corroborated retrospective reports'.

These findings support the viability and reliability of using conversion narrative over time and distance from the originating event. Jindra's research confirmed no significance in

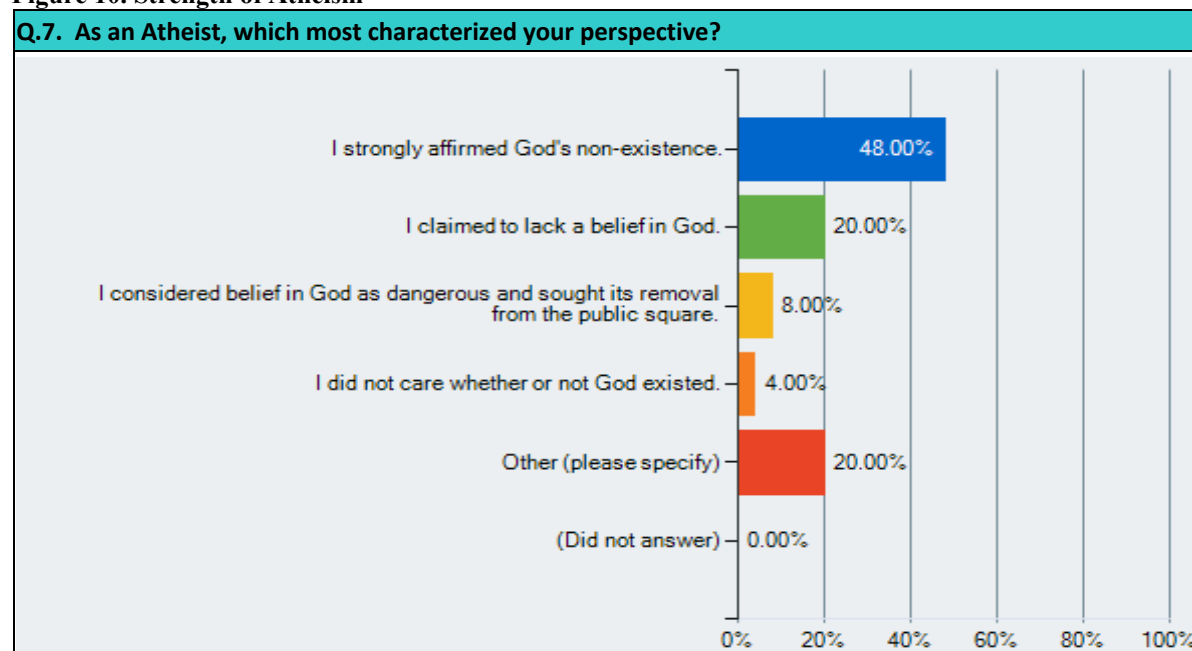
the nature of conversion narratives and time passed since conversion which she attributes to the 'power' of the Christian conversion narrative, Griffin Cook and Yang's research also attest to the consistency of Christian conversion narrative over time, particularly in light of its relationship to the overarching Christian metanarrative as well as the transformational nature of conversion. In analyzing 50 conversion narratives, this thesis concurs with these researchers. Regardless of years post-conversion, the converts in this study consistently substantiated a basic understanding and personal application of the Christian salvation story to their lives. This suggests that their conversion itself holds meaning over time and how they understand their conversion experience remains constant. Their narratives demonstrate conversion as having become a phenomenon, an object of truth in their lives. The conversion itself holds. Elements of the story may rise and fall, how they understand their conversion may change over time, but the object of inquiry, the conversion itself remains constant. Their individual narrative is also tied to the larger Christian meta-narrative. It is a reasonable hypothesis to think time post conversion matters, but the data does not reflect that to be so within Christianity.

6.2.2. Strength of the Atheistic Perspective

Survey and interview questions assessed strength, knowability, and confidence in their Atheistic perspective (SoGoSurvey Q7, Q12, and Q16), Atheistic views on God, Jesus, Christianity and Christians (Q6-Q11), contemplation of Atheistic worldview implications (Q14), felt satisfaction within the Atheistic, naturalistic worldview (Q15); and, perceived functional and/or substantive causes grounding Atheism (Q13, Q24-Q28).

First, subjects were asked to self-assess the strength of their former Atheistic perspective (Q7). A range of responses was allowed ranging from 'strong', 'positive' or active forms of Atheism to a 'weak', 'negative', or passive forms of Atheism. Nearly half (24/50; 48.0%) declared a (1) strong positive affirmation of God's non-existence; (2) a minority (4/50; 8.0%) affirmed the dangerous nature of belief in God, seeking removal of such belief (active, anti-theistic assertion).

Figure 10. Strength of Atheism



Combined, both strong forms of Atheism resulted in a slight majority (28/50; 56.0%); (3) approximately one in five (10/50; 20.0%) claimed a lack of belief ('weak Atheism'); (4) a smaller percentage (2/50; 6.0%) portrayed themselves as apathetic regarding God's existence (passive form of Atheism). Both forms of 'weak' Atheism combined resulted in a minority view (13/50; 26.0%). Finally, (5) nearly 20% (10/50; 20.0%) explained views in a categorical 'other' option.¹²⁸ These results reflected a spectrum of held belief, balanced between stronger and weaker assertions of Atheism. These responses, along with the diversity of held Atheistic typologies, provided an opportunity to evaluate varying strengths of disposition prior to conversion. Research data in this study, therefore, was not skewed by a particular type of Atheism but reflected a range more indicative within Western culture.

6.3. Motivations for Atheism

In order to understand respondents' motivations, they were asked as to specific reasons why they embraced Atheism. Responses included both Function (socio-cultural, moral, emotional, experiential, existential, and volitional) and Substance (intellectual and

¹²⁸ Interestingly, these ten respondents described their views as variable in strength and consistency and commented: belief in supernatural reality was 'outdated and stupid,' irrational, uneducated and/or anti-intellectual; belief in God was untenable due to distrust in religious institutions; God could not exist due to personal pain; or, that they possessed a 'lazy' 'unthoughtful' form of Atheism.

spiritual) influences.¹²⁹ Further, subjects were asked as to their contemplation of and satisfaction with Atheism in order to assess other contributing motivations. Two questions examined contemplation of Atheism (Q14) and felt satisfaction with Atheism (Q15) and two questions looked at motivations for Atheism, one from prior perspective ‘as an Atheist’ (Q13) and another from a perspective following conversion, ‘as a Christian looking back’ (Q24).

6.3.1. Functional Reasons for Atheism

Functional influences, both positive and negative, motivated Atheistic belief among survey respondents as shaped through macro- and micro-social influences as well as moral, emotional, and experiential motivations in addition to their own will and desire.

6.3.1.1. Macro-social Influences

Nearly half of respondents (24/50; 48.0%) (Q13) reported a general lack of exposure to Christian beliefs, understanding naturalistic Atheism as a culturally presumed perspective. Some countries and communities were further removed from an active dominant expression of Christian religion than others. Aaron stated:

A difference with *my Atheism* is I don’t think I actually heard an actual set-out deductive case for it. It *was just something I accepted as part of the culture* I was in. I kind of absorbed the criticism and skepticism of that culture which is one that is necessarily sort of skeptical and almost anti-religious in a sense.

And, so you don’t need to hear an argument, for when you speak to people. They’ll say there’s not any evidence, they haven’t examined any evidence for it but they’ll give common things to say. They’ll say there’s no evidence for God, but they haven’t actually read any books or exerted any time into examining the best case for Christianity or theism. *They’re just saying common things they’ve heard.*

¹²⁹ Function variables (F) were defined and coded as (1) social (soc): influences from immediate social environments (family, friends, significant relationships); (2) cultural (cult): influences from larger social entities (community, technology, education, arts, media); (3) emotional (emot): self-reported positive and/or negative emotional states and responses (to life events, experiences, perceptions of reality); (4) experiential (exp): positive and/or negative life experiences prompting a cognitive or emotional response, dissonance, understanding; (5) existential (exist): self-reflection regarding one’s own sense of worth/value, purpose, meaning and destiny in relation to one’s understanding of reality and/or held worldview; (6) moral (mor): internal reflection on personal and/or objective moral duties and obligations; (7) will (will): reported resistance and/or openness towards alternation of perspective. Substance influences include Substance Intellectual (SI) and Spiritual Experiential (SE).

Negative socio-cultural exposure to and experience with Christianity also contributed to the development of disbelief due to perceived hypocrisy (48.0-50.0%), intolerance (11/50; 22.0%), negative personal experience (12/50; 24.0%). Negative cultural stereotypes of Christians seen through technology and media (i.e., social networks, film, art, television) undermining its desirability and plausibility. For example, Joseph reported being two generations removed from exposure to Christianity. His view of Christians was informed by cultural media's negative stereotyping of religious belief (Ned Flanders, an uneducated, unattractive Christian caricature from an adult cartoon show). Regarding the outlook and influence of the cultural elite on religion, he stated,

For a big part of the population, particularly for the cultural elites, religion is regarded as like pornography. It is a horrible, dirty, disgusting thing that we allow people to do because we live in a free society, but it should be kept in a paper bag where people don't have to see it or be affronted by it... That's kind of where I was, mostly ignorant of religion, partly against it, and a little mystified as to why people continued to do this.

Educational institutions also influenced Atheistic belief. Respondents reported school environments as primarily encouraging belief towards Atheism (30/50; 60.0%) (Q25a), secondarily towards 'neither' Atheism or Christianity (16/50; 32.0%) (Q25a): and, lastly towards Christianity (9/50; 18.0%) (Q25a). Formal education led towards Atheistic belief at the level of high school (32/50; 64.0%) (Q27l) and university (23/50; 47.0%) (Q27m). By contrast, general community influences primarily encouraged belief in Christianity (20/50; 40.0%) (Q25c) secondarily in 'neither' Christianity nor Atheism (20/50; 40.0%) (Q25c) and thirdly advanced Atheism (11/50; 21.0%) (Q25c).

6.3.1.2. Micro-social Influences

Micro-cultural social relationships such as family, friends and acquaintances influenced survey participants' Atheism. Reported core family influences (Q25b) tended towards belief in Christianity (20/50; 40.0%), followed by 'neither' (18/50; 36.0%), and/or Atheism (13/50; 26.0%), a comparable finding to general community influence. Regarding family religious history (Q4), the majority of respondents reported no practice of religious

faith (29/50; 58.0%), and a minority reported nominal Catholic or protestant Christian faith (13/50; 26.0%), or active religious Catholic or protestant Christian faith (9/50; 18.0%).

When asked as to primary reasons for Atheism, George (Q24) said, 'A big factor was my parents. Both treated religion and religious questions as unimportant, irrelevant, unnecessary to living life'. On interview, Dennis described his non-religious home and social settings:

I grew up in a household that was areligious. They weren't irreligious, but they were areligious. *There was no discussion of religion. There is no discussion of faith.* My dad left my mother, my brother and I went I was seven years old. So, I really didn't have a father figure in the house, and my mom never talked about faith. I was close to my grandparents, especially my grandmother. I would say in some sense they raised me more than my mother did, but they were also areligious. *They didn't say anything bad about religion, but they never talked about it. It never came up.*

So, I was not exposed in the house at all to anything about faith. And my friends, none of them were, none of their parents were religious either. I was in a world where religion and faith was just absent. It was a non-issue. So, I didn't think about it a lot.

A lack of personal, familial exposure to the Christian worldview created a vacuum filled by negative socio-cultural and educational messaging regarding the irrelevance, undesirability and tacit dismissal of God and Christianity, secondarily affirmed by negative personal life experiences.

Friends and family members also contributed both towards and away from Atheist belief. The majority (39/50; 78.0%) (Q5) reported that they were raised in a home with married parents; a minority (5/50; 10.0%) (Q5) were raised in a single parent home; and, the remaining (6/50; 12.0%) (Q5) lived in a two parent home until divorce (one respondent was age 5, five respondents were ages 12-14) at which time they lived in a single parent home. One-third of respondents (18/50; 36.0%) (Q28b) reported that family and friends influenced them towards Atheism. A small number of participants reported that healthy or troubled family relationships encouraged Atheistic belief. Healthy maternal relationships (5/50; 10.0%) (Q26c) and paternal relationships (5/50; 10.0%) (Q26i) contributed to Atheism. In

contrast, troubled and/or absent relationships with mothers (7/50; 14.0%) (Q26d) or fathers (14/50; 28.0%) (Q26e) contributed to Atheism.¹³⁰ An Atheist at 14, Jennifer recalled:

I grew up not trusting fathers as I had been abandoned by mine...My father was in and out of our lives. He was gone quite a bit. And when he did show up he was very difficult or violent or despondent or what not. So, by extension, I wasn't going to trust a father, and certainly not an eternal father...

I was working several jobs and supporting my family. My dad was in and out of my life. My mom was a single mom raising us and she was drinking at night. I was putting her to bed after she was drinking, and I was working through college. I was so busy surviving.¹³¹

Jacob was raised in a Christian home and perceived God as 'a caretaker' until his own father disregarded his caretaker role through infidelity and abandonment of the family. At age 14, Jacob's loss of trust in his father transferred to loss of trust and belief in God. He recalled,

About seventh grade or halfway through middle school my family began to change. My family started not being as involved in the church. My father began to not come home as often. Eventually my parents divorced in seventh grade and that certainly hurt my faith, not perhaps at that moment but more so gradually without the leadership, the guidance on a daily basis...*I didn't see him for about six years.* I didn't see him until about senior year of high school.

*I didn't understand why it could have happened or why it would have happened, why someone or parents who were so involved in the church, why this could have happened to them. That was very groundbreaking for me. And also, I just prayed for the relationship that they would not divorce, and then it did. So, I felt very unheard.*¹³²

For others, negative life experiences fueled contemptuousness towards authority. Adam described a loss of security in his family due to the divorce of his parents at age 12. This

¹³⁰ Those who reported a negative relationship solely with their mother (and not father) as fueling Atheistic belief was only one respondent (01/50; 02.0%); with father only (8/50; 16.69%); and, with both parents (6/50; 12.0%). The role of an emotionally and/or physically absent father has been theoretically discussed as a psychological influence towards disbelief in God. Emotional and/or physical abuse or absence of a father has been correlated with development of Atheism in a child, per Paul Vitz's theory as discussed in his book, *Faith of the Fatherless*. His theory turned Sigmund Freud's wish-fulfillment theory (that individuals believe in God secondary to psychological need for a father figure) on its head, rejecting God due to the abuse and/or neglect experienced by their earthly father.

¹³¹ Interview: Jennifer continued, 'The road of my adolescence with him in particular was rocky. This informed my distrust of any spiritual father, by extension. My mother was very sweet but also very bitter, and so her Catholicism was empty of Jesus and a bit superstitious and double-edged...My father and I reconciled after I became a Christian, with much healing and joy, and eventually he became a Christian too. This gift has profoundly sweetened my faith, because it has drawn me into trusting more and living a life of listening, of trying and learning to. My mother has softened greatly and her cynicism of Jesus in particular has left but she is still hesitant'.

¹³² Interview: Jacob further describes the devolution of his faith: 'I grew up in a Christian family who attended church regularly. Divorce and adultery plagued my parents, and after the splitting of the family, I gradually lost faith. Left unguided without a place to receive proper Christian apologetic responses, I embraced relative ethical and moral truth, and religion became merely a cultural influence to me. Christianity is one of the many. This eventually led my belief into the naturalistic worldview. Eventually, after years of Atheism, the question of God lost its importance; the thought of the question of why we came to be became dumb to me - as Richard Dawkins puts it, the question of 'why' is sometimes a very stupid question.'

family trauma and an increased awareness of ‘trouble in the world’ combined with his belief in a naturalistic, scientific worldview resulted in disillusionment and rebellion against authority figures who were viewed as uncaring, absent or irrelevant. When asked what informed his doubts about God, he stated:

So, it appeared like every authoritative structure seemed to be failing me – whether it be my parents or the government or the church. They all seemed to be failing and so I thought it would be better for me to make up my own version of truth. I don’t think I made a conscience decision to do so until well after the fact. It seemed better to me to base things on my experience rather than to base things on failing institutions.

Other functional causes included encounters with Christians (17/50; 34.0%) (Q28a), religious discussions (16/50; 32.0%) (Q28c)¹³³ and attending religious service(s) (15/50; 29.4%) (Q28d). The desire for social acceptance led approximately one-third (15/50; 30.0%) (Q24) to two-fifths (21/50; 42.0%) (Q28f) of respondents towards Atheism. One-fifth (10/50; 20%) (Q28g) ‘felt pressured’ towards belief in Atheism. A small number of spousal and/or significant social relationships encouraged Atheism (3/50; 06.0%) (Q26f). Approximately one-fifth of former Atheists reported ‘belonging [to Atheist community] before belief’ (9/50; 18.0%) (Q28h) as well as ‘belief [in Atheism] before belonging’ (11/50; 22.0%) (Q28i). Two-fifths (20/50; 40.0%) (Q28e) ‘independently chose to believe in Atheism apart from the influence of others.’

6.3.1.3. Moral, Experiential, and Emotional Motivations

A desire for moral freedom ranked highest among functional influences towards Atheism, as nearly half (23/50; 46.0%) (Q26n) reported ‘moral choices’ as having led them towards Atheism with desire towards liberation from moral authority. As an Atheist, ‘moral constraints on personal behavior’ contributed to non-belief for one-third (16/50; 32.0%) (Q13); and, nearly half of respondents appreciated Atheism’s ‘allowance of freedom in

¹³³ Religious discussions with Atheists can and do serve to alienate rather than promote belief in religious ideas at times. This may be due to a variety of causes including, but not limited to, the manner/tone of information conveyance, lack of intellectual and/or emotional respect for the religious person, lack of desire to listen and/or change one’s perspective, etc. Religious discussion may also foster ‘The Backfire Effect’ whereby the religious person presumes that when beliefs are challenged with facts that the other person will readily alter his/her opinions and incorporate the new information into their thinking; whereas in reality, when an individual’s deepest convictions are challenged by contradictory evidence, their beliefs potentially get stronger.

personal choices' (24/50; 48.0%) (Q15). As a 'Christian looking back' on reasons for Atheism, desire for moral autonomy (21/50; 42.0%) (Q24) ranked second to intellectual reasons among the respondents. Kyle described his desire for moral autonomy as contributing to his Atheism:

I think for a while the attractiveness of Atheism was defined by it not being Christianity. It's attractive to think I am not going to be judged. It's attractive to think that I could sleep with anyone I want or use whatever language I want or make any decisions that I want or go and get drunk or whatever.

At least theoretically, it seemed like the idea of freedom and casting off shutters and being liberated. I wanted this God stuff to be false. I lived under my parents' authority so much of my life. I am a free man now. I don't want a cosmic authority, please. You figure out that all of this God stuff is not true, so naturally, as you would do with anything else that is rubbish, you throw it away because you don't need it and you can breathe a sigh of relief and do what you want.

Positive life experiences led nearly one-third towards Atheism (14/50; 28.0%) (Q26l). Alternatively, negative life traumatic events (such as illness, death, and/or personal trauma in conjunction with unanswered prayer) contributed to Atheism in nearly one-third of the participants (15/50; 30.0%) (26a).¹³⁴ Jeffrey soberly recalled the devastating emotional loss of his brothers as the sudden cause of his Atheism:

In October of 1977 when I was 7 years old at the time, we experienced a house fire and my younger brother didn't get out of the house. He died with smoke poisoning. And my older brother who was 11 at the time, I remember him walking out of the house and he was on fire. And they put him out, put him in the ambulance and I sat at his feet.

I was sent to church the week after and the minister said, 'Come and we will pray,' and I ran away. I said, 'If that is what God has done to my brother then I don't want anything to do I with it' and I became an Atheist. My brother survived for 5 days and then died. He had third degree burns over 90% of his body and it was probably a blessing that he did die. But I could have nothing to do with religion.

¹³⁴ Interview: Recalling a sobering event in her life, Jessica spoke of her distancing from belief in God: 'When I was 22, my best friend, a girl that was Catholic, died in a car accident, and that...Any remaining shred of thought of praying or anything like that was gone. She had actually gotten involved and some pretty rough things, drugs and such. She had been sober for only three months when she died. The accident was not her fault. And I just felt like, "Okay God, you are a horrible, horrible thing if you are real because that's disgusting. Like, why would you do that, like, are you laughing? You just put all of her friends and family through this and then she just comes back around, and you just snuff out her life. Like, is this a sick joke?" And, I don't know, on one hand I would've sworn up and down that I did not believe that God existed and on the other hand I blamed him for what was going on...That one just sealed it. So, I carried that around with me.'

Prolonged negative life experiences (as opposed to acute events) prompted disbelief in two-fifths (20/50; 40.0%) (Q26k). These negative experiences occurred with either non-believers or with ‘supposed’ Christians.¹³⁵ Gary described his difficult childhood and inability to believe in God:

Yes, God was mocked, and He wasn’t relevant at all. I didn’t even think about it other than, as I started to get a bit older, I did make a decision to reject it. But that happened through a couple of really painful experiences. These people would talk about, ‘Oh, God loves you.’ Those messages might creep in and I would be like, ‘If He loves you, there is no way this stuff happens. This is ridiculous. There’s no way. These people are just dense...

If there was a God loves us, then I wouldn’t feel the way I felt. I wouldn’t go through what I was going through... That there’s no way it’s real. Because if it was real things wouldn’t work like this. I wouldn’t have an alcoholic father. I wouldn’t go through the stuff that you go through with an alcoholic parent. In my story, there was sexual abuse [from a neighbor]. That to me, once that happened, life got very dark for me.



Personal divorce/relationship breakup held prominent in the movement towards disbelief in God in the lives of a few respondents (6/50; 12.0%) (Q26h). In hindsight, approximately one-fourth of former Atheists reported personal pain and suffering (13/50; 26.0%) (Q24) or general world evil, pain and suffering (10/50; 22.0%) (Q24) as having fostered doubt and/or disappointment with God.

Existential aspects of humanity also played a role in the development and sustenance of Atheistic belief. A few respondents moved towards Atheism secondary to a quest for emotional fulfillment (6/50; 12.0%) (Q26m). A high sense of self-worth promoted Atheism in one-third of respondents (17/50; 34.0%) (Q26g). Conversely, a low sense of self-worth encouraged non-belief in two-fifths (11/50; 22.0%) (Q26b). A small minority pursued Atheism to provide meaning and purpose in life (7/50; 14.0%) (Q26j). Nearly half of

¹³⁵ Interview: After prolonged personal emotional pain, an incident of gross Christian hypocrisy was the final impetus that caused David to ‘give his life to Satan’: ‘Some of it was personal experience with Christians. I don’t know if I told many people this but there was a time after my mom had kicked my dad out of the house and after they had been divorced; and it actually happened on my birthday. There was this guy who was a mission fieldworker and he ended up coming over to our house. I thought, “Whatever, that’s cool.”^{4.1} I got some friends over. It was my birthday party. I think I was 15 or 16. And at some point, because my mom’s bedroom and my bedroom were on opposite sides of the house, I got it to go ask my mom something. I couldn’t find them, and they were in the bedroom. I knocked on the door and walked in and they were naked. So, something like that left a bad taste towards Christianity.’

respondents (22/50; 44.0%) (Q13) expressed a general unwillingness and/or a lack of desire for belief in God. Twenty respondents specifically ‘did not want to believe that Christianity was true’ (20/50; 40.0%) (Q17). Based upon these results, the functional, non-rational component of Atheism is a strong contributor to the development of nonbelief, through social, experiential, emotional, existential, moral, and volitional influences. In sum, from ‘an Atheist perspective’ functional reasons for disbelief (Q13) are listed below in the order of prevalence:¹³⁶

Table 09. Functional Reasons for Atheism

Q13. As an Atheist, my primary reason(s) for disbelief in God and Christianity include: (select all that apply)			
Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
FUNCTION			
religious hypocrisy of Christian leaders	25	50.0%	
religious hypocrisy of Christian institutions	24	48.0%	
lack of exposure to Christian belief, generally	24	48.0%	
unwillingness, lack of desire for belief	22	44.0%	
moral constraints on personal behavior	16	32.0%	
negative personal experience with Christian people	12	24.0%	
suffering in the lives of others	13	26.0%	
negative social consequences of belief	12	24.0%	
intolerance of Christians	11	22.0%	
personal pain in my life	8	16.0%	
negative vocational consequences for belief	0	0%	

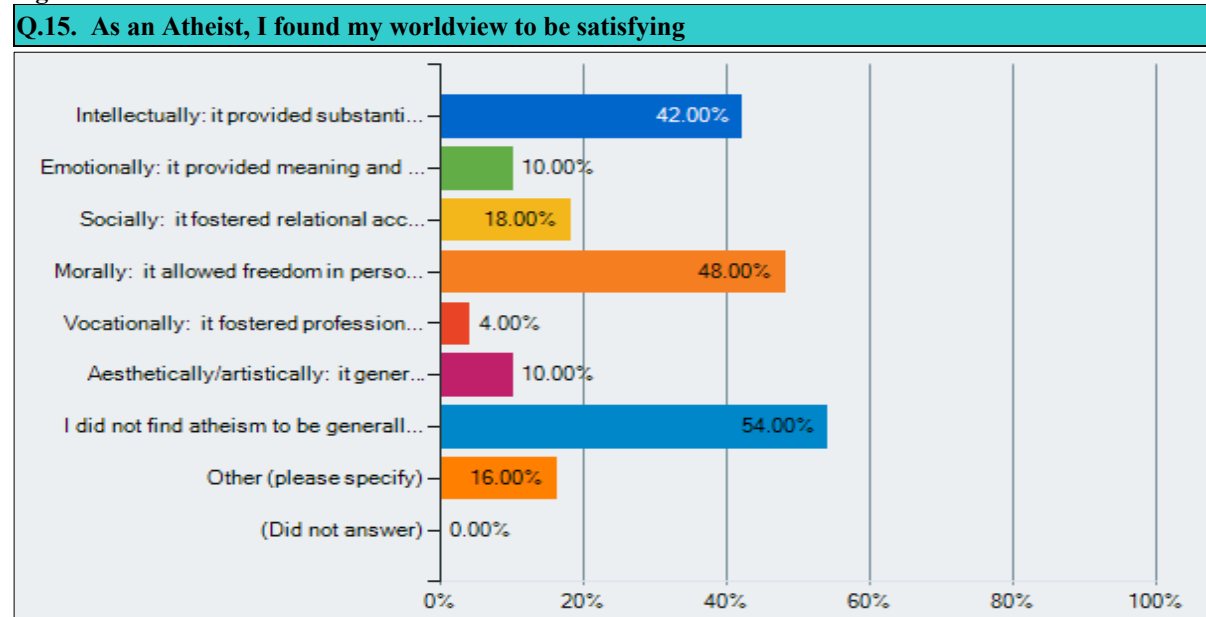
6.3.1.4. Felt Satisfaction with and Functional Contemplation of Atheism

All ideologies entail conceptual and practical implications as informed by what is deemed to be ultimate reality. Atheists were asked as to whether or not they seriously contemplated, accepted, were motivated, satisfied or unsettled by their worldview. Many respondents appreciated the positive aspects of Atheism as affirming, satisfying and influential towards their held belief. From a functional perspective, one-third of Atheists reported ‘no felt perceived need for God’ in their lives (17/50; 34.0%) (Q24). Morally, half (24/50; 48%) (Q15) believed they lived freely and enjoyed the freedom allowed in making

¹³⁶ This summary captures negative functional motivations towards belief in Atheism but does not acknowledge positive aspects as brought forth in other survey questions.

personal choices.¹³⁷ One-fifth (9/50; 18.0%) (Q15) found that Atheism fostered relational acceptance and enrichment. Emotionally and existentially, only one-tenth (5/50; 10.0%) (Q15) found that Atheism provided a stronger sense of self¹³⁸ or meaning and purpose to life and living. Five (5/50; 10.0%) (Q15) found meaningful depth in and through artistic expression within Atheism (5/50; 10.0%) (Q15); and, two subjects (2/50; 4.0%) (Q15) affirmed that Atheism fostered vocational respect.¹³⁹

Figure 11. Satisfaction within Atheism



Others considered implications of Atheism as impactful in their lives, whether positively or negatively. Existential issues (Q14) weighed most heavily as matters of contemplation. Two-thirds (33/50; 66.0%) (Q14) ‘seriously contemplated’ ultimate purpose and meaning in their lives. James candidly stated, ‘Life to me was meaningless, but that thought tortured me’. A comparable number (30/50; 60.0%) (Q14) considered life after death.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ SoGoSurvey (Q15): Moral autonomy allowed pursuit of personal pleasure without guilt. Greg stated, ‘I only tended to realize Atheism’s negative implications in my thirties. I tended to ignore these implications in my twenties and enjoyed the moral freedom it provided’.

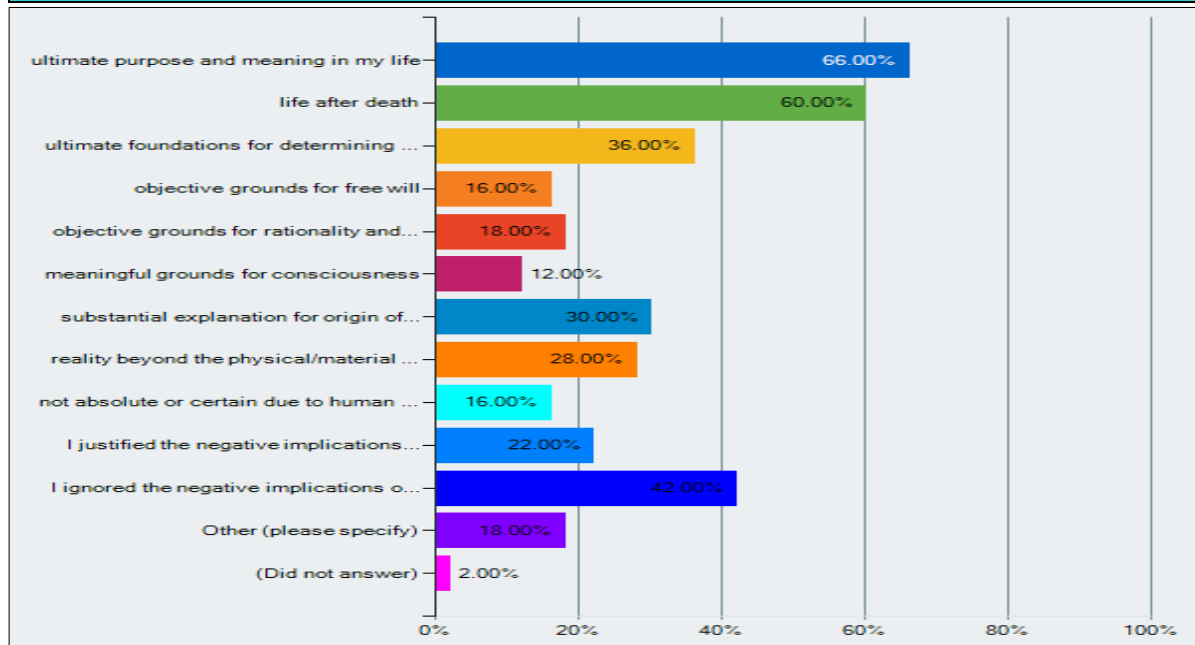
¹³⁸ Emotionally affirming, Atheism ‘had a certain psychological appeal’ for Michelle as she felt she ‘was superior to others who ‘needed’ faith’. Sean felt ‘more intelligent and sensible by nature, [than religious believers] which made me feel great about myself’.

¹³⁹ Conversely, one respondent expressed keen awareness of the professional disdain potentially occurring as a result of an open profession of Christian belief; thus, this person chose to remain professionally ‘neutral’ post-conversion so as to not incur social and/or vocational penalty unnecessarily.

¹⁴⁰ On interview, Ed responded, ‘...but the idea that there was no afterlife, the implications of Atheism, that greatly frightened me. I was terrified. I know you read a lot about older Atheists that don’t find that terrifying. It’s certainly wasn’t my experience because of my age or whatever. That was the main thing that I thought about.’ However, Steven was not bothered by the fact and permanence of death, stating, ‘I had people, friends of mine who we’re Christians should we come up to me and say, ‘Have you ever thought what is going to happen to you when you die?’ To me, the only thing that is going

Figure 12. Contemplation of Atheist Implications

Q.14. As an Atheist, I seriously contemplated the implications of my worldview regarding the absence of:



6.3.2. Substantive Reasons for Atheism –










The role of the intellect (Substantive Intellectual (SI)) and perceived lack of spiritual reality (Spiritual Experiential (SE)) also contributed towards Atheism. When respondents were asked as to their primary reasons for disbelief in God and Christianity, the majority reported a lack of objective Substantive Intellectual (SI) evidence for God. Slightly more than half (29/50; 58.0%) (Q13) perceived a lack of objective scientific evidence for God. On further inquiry, scientific claims led three-quarters of the respondents towards Atheism (37/50; 74.0%) (27k). This finding coheres with the perception of irreconcilability between science and religious belief for half of the respondents (26/50; 52.0%) (Q13). Ryan describes the pervasive dismissal of religion within the scientific community:

It was just taken for granted that a mindless, development over time is how things just were. That was something that I just sort of adopted. It wasn't really like you have to reconcile two kinds of things like well there is a creation and there is science and how do you put those two things together. It was that there was no reason to assume that there was some sort of creator for any of it was probably how I would have said it. It was not something that you had to reconcile. It was like, *'Here science. Science wins. That's it.'*

to happen to me is my body is going to dissolve into the ground and that is it. I am conscious and alive today. I don't believe that anything is going to happen to me after I pass away, so that argument had no bearing on me what so ever'.

Other reported forms of insufficient evidence for God included philosophical (27/50; 54.0%) (Q13) and historical (20/50; 40.0%) (Q13) data. Supernatural claims of the Bible caused disbelief for two-fifths (21/50; 42.0%) (Q13), and Christianity appeared to be irrational for half of the respondents (26/50; 52.0%) (Q13). Approximately half of the former Atheists reported their doubts and uncertainties (25/50; 50.0%) (Q27c), unanswered questions (26/50; 52.0%) (Q27d), and tendency towards questioning (24/50; 48.0%) (Q27n) led them intellectually towards Atheism.¹⁴¹

Table 10. Substantive Reasons for Atheism

Q13. As an Atheist, my primary reason(s) for disbelief in God and Christianity was/were: (please select all that apply)			
Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
SUBSTANCE			
SPIRITUAL (SE)			
INTELLECTUAL (SI)			
lack of subjective evidence for God, personal (SE)	30	60.0%	
lack of objective evidence for God, scientific (SI)	29	58.0%	
lack of objective evidence for God, philosophical (SI)	27	54.0%	
irrationality of Christian belief (SI)	26	52.0%	
irreconcilability between science and religion (SI)	26	52.0%	
supernatural claims of the Bible (SI)	21	42.0%	
lack of objective evidence for God, historical (SI)	20	40.0%	
unanswered prayer (SE)	10	20.0%	
Other (please specify)	5	10.64%	

However, the most often reported (substantive) reason for Atheism was a strongly perceived lack of personal experience with God due to an expected but unrealized spiritual, supernatural presence and/or reality. More than half of the participants reported non-belief due to perceived lack of subjective evidence for God (30/52; 60.0%) (Q13), including

¹⁴¹ Interview: Jacob. When asked if he pursued having his doubts addressed, Jacob replied: ‘When I would ask hard questions, no one seemed to have an answer. Saying that you have all of the answers is foolish. Sometimes it is good to say, ‘I don’t know.’ But there is less and less that I don’t have answers for. At the same time, if I had what seemed to be cogent answers for things and no one had a response to them, then I would just assume that I was right.’ Further, when asked who he sought to answer his questions, he stated: ‘Just family and friends. I didn’t go to my pastor. When we were in church, it seemed like a separate thing from the rest of the world, a small portion of the stuff your life. This is something we do for this hour on this day and then we go back to being our normal selves. It was good for a guilt trip, depending on how bad I felt about what I had done. That was also a deciding factor to help me leave the church too.’

unanswered prayer (10/50; 20.0%) (Q13), personal pain (8/50; 16.0%) (Q13) as well as suffering in the lives of others (13/50; 26.0%) (Q13), as afore-reported.¹⁴² This subjective finding is surprising in light of the strongly reported rational, intellectual component of Atheism reported on in the literature.

6.3.2.1. Atheistic Views on God, Jesus, Christianity, and Christians

Respondents were asked to report their views on the nature and cause of religious, particularly Christian, beliefs. The overwhelming perception was negative, reinforcing substantive reasons for disbelief. The majority of participants viewed religious belief in God (Q8) as merely stemming from socio-cultural influence (31/50; 62%), as a harmless, irrational projection of psychological need (24/50; 48.0%), and/or a desire for an idealized father figure (7/50; 13.73%).¹⁴³ Sean described belief in God akin to an ‘invisible friend, completely fictional’ and Joshua thought God represented a ‘cultural babysitter’. Others negatively regarded belief in God as ‘dangerous’ (19/50; 38.0%),¹⁴⁴ with God an effectively ‘abusive, malevolent, fictional figure’ (10/50; 20.0%). Melissa thought theism as ‘mostly benign but potentially dangerous, like many strongly held beliefs’. Kyle, Jason, and James respectively espoused the repressive nature of belief as held by ‘illiberal, unimaginative, inhibited, closed-minded people’, ‘an imposition on my rights’, or ‘the curse of the earth’. More than half (30/50; 60.0%) associated embarrassment with theistic belief; and nearly half (25/50; 49.02%) perceived belief as essentially irrelevant, described as by Amanda as an

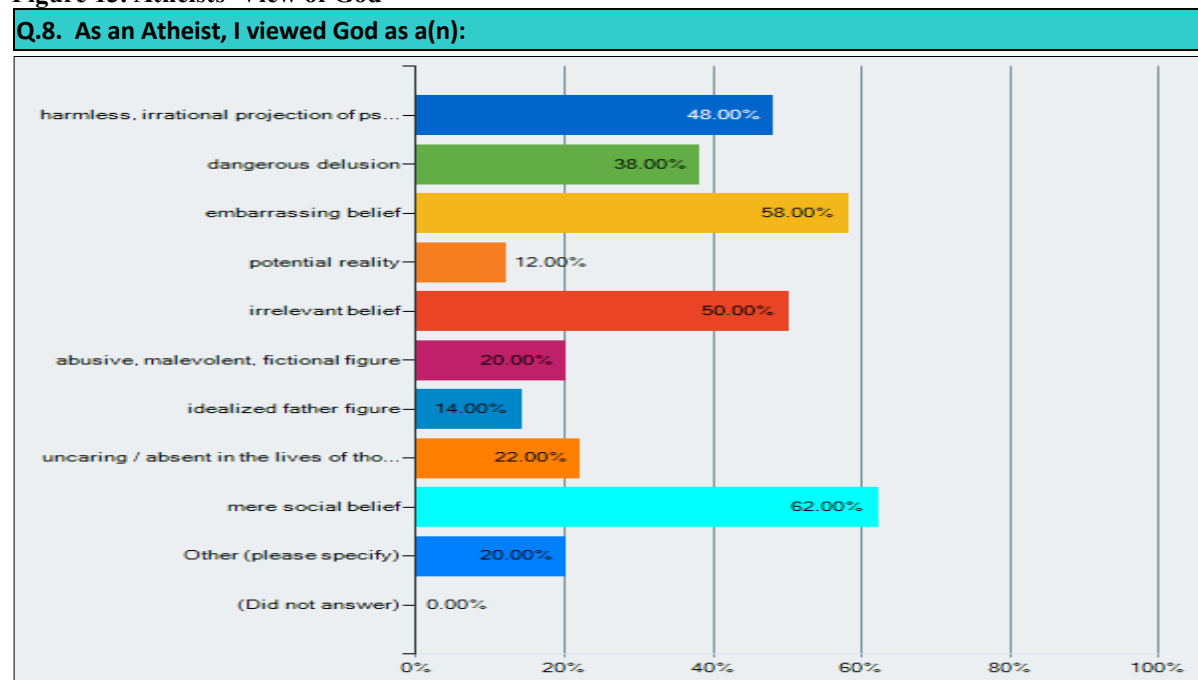
¹⁴² Interview: Timothy spoke of his disappointment in God as related to his sister’s congenital disease: ‘What was happening concurrently was that my sister, when she was 14, was diagnosed with ataxia and scoliosis, a genetic disease and disorder. It was a neuromuscular disorder so she couldn’t walk. She was debilitating and getting worse and worse. I didn’t really know what to make of that...This disease did not fit into any of that. Yeah, okay, so what about that?’ So, I didn’t tell anybody. It was my own private disappointment or sadness and it grew until I was roughly 16 or 17.’

¹⁴³ On interview, Matthew commented, ‘I thought you were just deluding themselves. It was, I don’t want to say it was a harmful delusion, but it was just like, ‘Why don’t you just deal with reality the way that is?’ and ‘Why are you kidding yourself with this nonsense, with miracles and all of this stuff?’ ‘Obviously, we don’t see any of that stuff.’ So, I don’t know. If anybody tried to talk with me about that stuff, then I would get very hostile and defensive and stuff like that.’ Jessica similarly thought of belief in God as ‘more of ... a Santa Claus figure. He was ... someone they (Christians) looked to solve their problems or to give them things they wanted and also told them what to do, what rules to follow.’

¹⁴⁴ Regarding the harmful, dangerous nature of belief in God, a participant Todd recollected, ‘In college was where I started really thinking that it wasn’t just sometimes good and sometimes bad but, if there was a dominant theme, it was more harmful than anything else in that it convinced large groups of people to do really stupid things and act inhumanely or unethically or immorally and it is all of the stories you hear about...And keep in mind at this point I was putting Christianity in the bucket with all other religions’.

‘unnecessary explanation’ and George as ‘factually false, more-or-less disproven, as disbelieved by modern science’. Others thought God as ‘uncaring/absent’ (11/50; 22.0%). Only a small minority (6/50; 12.0%) considered God as a ‘potential reality’ prior to conversion. Some respondents particularly viewed the Judeo-Christian God with greater animus, while allowing the (unlikely) possibility of other forms of spirituality when moving from Atheism towards belief in the supernatural. Christopher (Q8) stated, ‘[I] generally considered Christianity dangerously ignorant while considering other forms of spirituality perhaps well-meaning but naive, or even potentially true’.

Figure 13. Atheists' View of God

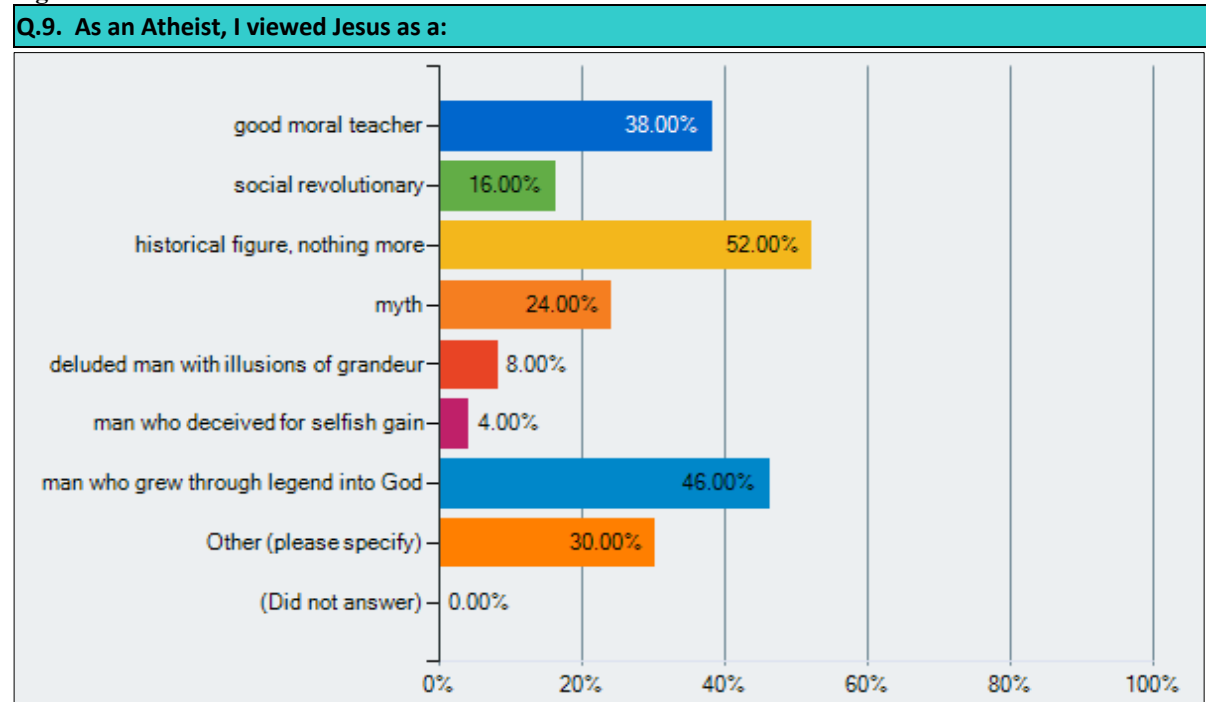


Perceptions of Jesus (Q9) similarly varied regarding his historicity, character and nature. The predominant perspective among study participants viewed Jesus Christ of Nazareth as a ‘historical figure, nothing more’ (26/50; 52.0%). Nearly half (23/50; 46.0%) considered Jesus to be a historical man who, over time, grew through fabricated legend into God. Others held the historical Jesus was a good moral teacher (19/50; 38.0%), or perhaps a social revolutionary (8/50; 16.0%). Close to one-quarter (12/50; 24.0%) deemed Jesus to be purely non-historical myth.¹⁴⁵ This presumed mythological view was interesting in light of

¹⁴⁵ SoGoSurvey (Q8) Sean: One participant thought Jesus was ‘entirely fictional/folklore/tall tale/made up character (i.e., Santa Clause, Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Pecos Bill, etc.)’.

affirmed historical veracity of Jesus even among contemporary skeptics.¹⁴⁶ A minority of respondents held to the historical reality of Jesus but as a negative figure, ‘a deluded man with illusions of grandeur’ (4/50; 8.0%), or ‘a man who deceived for selfish gain’ (2/50; 4.0%).¹⁴⁷ Five respondents (5/50; 10%) reported a lack of consideration of the person of Jesus due to their primary position as a non-theist.¹⁴⁸

Figure 14. Atheists' View of Jesus



When questioned as to their perspective on Christianity (Q10), the strongly dominant view among nearly three-fourths of respondents thought it was a ‘man-made religion’ (37/50; 74.0%), and/or a ‘false, antiquated, and/or superstitious ideology’ (37/50; 74.0%). Other negative perceptions of Christianity included its portrayal as non-relevant (30/50; 60.0%), judgmental (21/50; 42.0%), intolerant (19/50; 38.0%) and even dangerous (9/50; 18.0%).¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ For example, in refuting the concept of Jesus as mere myth, skeptical agnostic Bart Ehrman contended for Jesus as a historical person, that mythicist views are ‘extreme’ and ‘unconvincing’ among modern scholars. See *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, March 2012, Harper Collins. Those who contend for Jesus as pure myth are outliers in the academy (e.g., Richard Carrier).

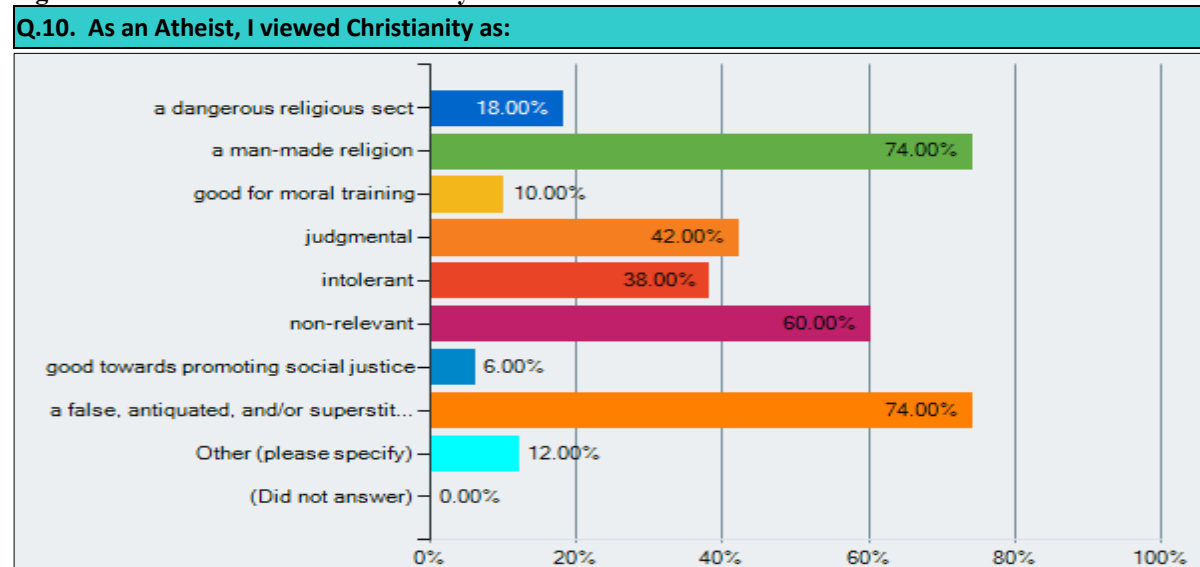
¹⁴⁷ ‘Lunatic’ or ‘liar’ in C.S. Lewis’s famous trilemma, *Mere Christianity*. Within his framework, consideration of Jesus as a merely ‘good moral teacher’ was not an option as one who proclaimed himself to be God. For Lewis, this reductionistic view is ‘patronizing nonsense’. Either Jesus was liar, lunatic, or Lord of all.

¹⁴⁸ Kyle stated, ‘I didn’t even think of him very much. It was easier to get hooked on the general absurdity of theism in general’. Dennis responded, ‘I did not have any significant view of Jesus. Why consider him as a non-theist?’ Similarly, Greg remarked, ‘It’s strange, I don’t really recall a lot of direct thoughts about Jesus himself. I mostly challenged the belief in God’.

¹⁴⁹Not unusual, Christopher believed Christianity’s ‘moral positions (e.g., on sexual sin) were dangerous and outdated’.

Alternatively, a minority perceived Christianity as good for moral training (5/50; 10.0%) and a promoter of social justice (3/50; 6.0%). Others remarked on the presumed nature of Christianity's social and/or psychological construction.¹⁵⁰

Figure 15. Atheists' View of Christianity



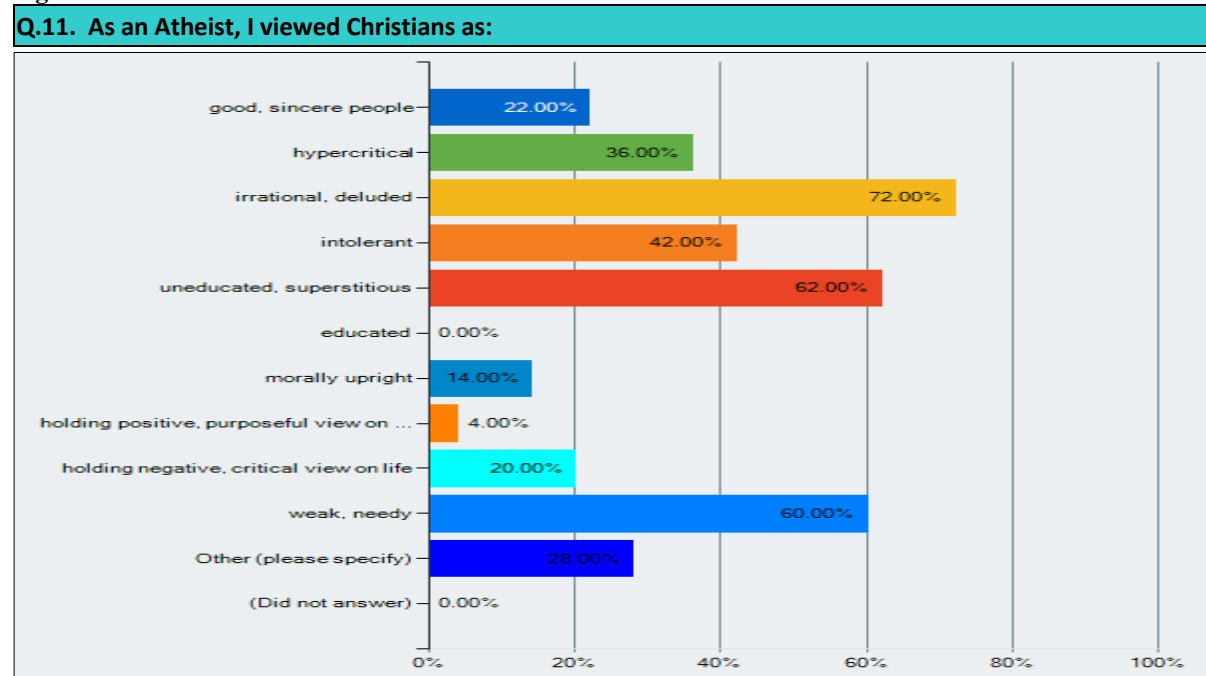
Study respondents reported an unfavorable view of Christians (Q11). As Atheists, the majority of respondents held Christians to be ‘irrational, deluded’ (36/50; 72%), ‘weak, needy’ (30/50; 60%) and ‘uneducated, superstitious’ (31/50; 62%) people. *Not one participant in the study responded positively to the perception that Christians were educated people (0/50; 0.00%).* This was a strongly adverse impression among Atheists who held themselves, as aforementioned, as an intellectual superior group. For Greg, Christians were:

...weak people, weak intellectuals. I remember that being a feature of my thought process back then. It was like, ‘Only people who just don’t have the intellectual honesty and guts have to rely on this [religion] to get them through life. If only they were courageous and faced the reality that there is nothing out there in the universe. It is just a universe full of cold dead particles. And, *carpe diem* until, you know, have as much fun as you can while you can. And that’s about it. That’s all life is, right?’ *I remember thinking that Atheism was a mature perspective for strong adults; and, religion was for weak children and old ladies.* That’s the way I used to think.

¹⁵⁰ Rooted in sociological culture, James viewed Christianity as ‘mere tradition, of no substance for those in the West who were simply born into it’. Amanda commented, ‘I just had this impression that no intelligent person really believes this stuff. I mean they might go to church just because their family does, it’s like a tradition and it’s pleasant in that sense, but there’s no reason’. Kyle viewed Christianity as born from psychological need as ‘a construct by people who couldn’t handle the complexity and animal-like depths of human nature, and of nature itself’.

Brad thought Christians needed to ‘shed their false presuppositions in order to change their false, superstitious beliefs’ and Richard (Q11) conceived them as ‘brainwashed’. Other negative impressions included Christians as intolerant (21/50; 42.0%) and hypercritical (18/50; 36.0%), generally holding a negative, critical view on life (10/50; 20.0%). Christians were also perceived as socially ‘odd’ or ‘weird’ although others recognized diversity among Christians whether in sincerity or pragmatics.¹⁵¹ A minority viewed Christians through a positive lens, acknowledging Christians as ‘good, sincere people’ (11/50; 22.0%), ‘morally upright’ (7/50; 13.73%), and/or ‘holding a positive, purposeful view on life’ (2/50; 4.0%).

Figure 16. Atheists' View of Christians

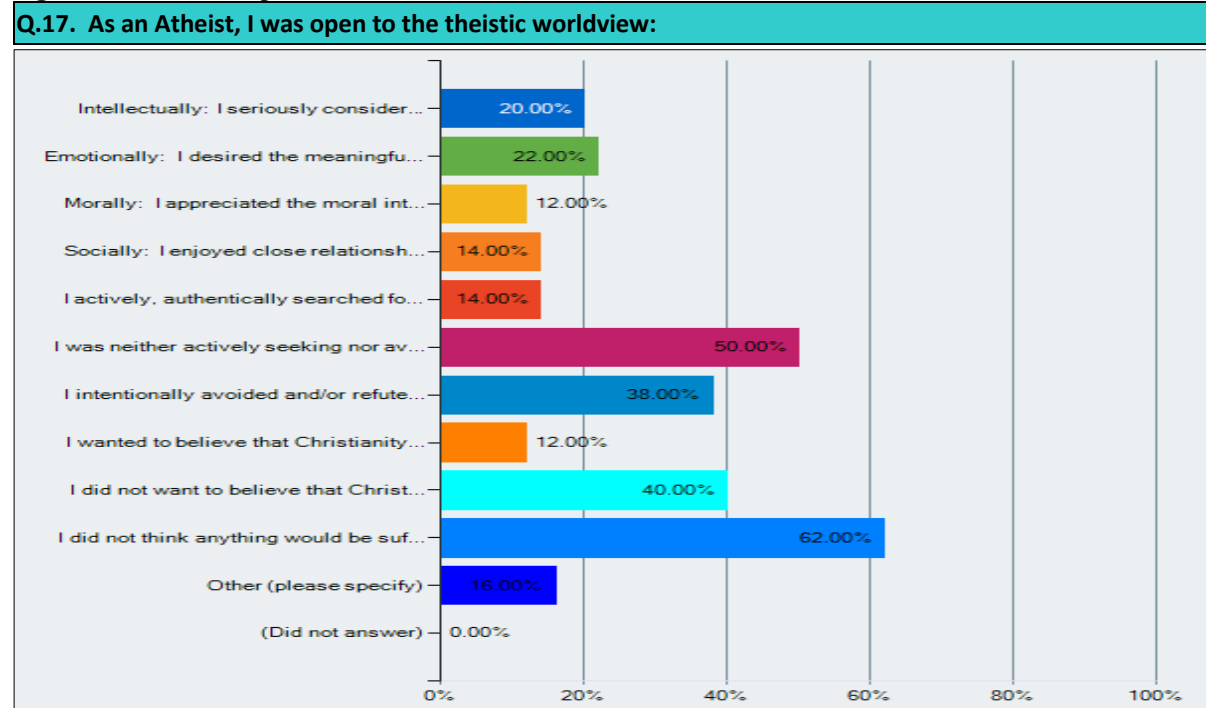


When respondents were asked as to whether or not they considered themselves as to open to the theistic worldview (Q17), they reported a high level of resistance. *Nearly two-thirds of the former Atheists in this study (62.0%; 31/50) ‘did not think anything would be sufficient to change their Atheistic worldview’.* However, many candidly admitted resistance for more than substantive reasons. *More than one-third (20/50; 40.0%) ‘did not want to believe that Christianity was true’* and a comparable number (19/50; 38.0%) ‘intentionally

¹⁵¹ Recognizing a variability among Christians, Dennis characterized his perspective of Christians as, ‘I did not formulate a significant view of Christians...I was uninterested in them and did not have any positive or negative views about them other than I thought they were a bit socially odd’. Conversely, Christopher stated, ‘I mostly demonized Christians, but there were a few genuinely thoughtful, sincere, compassionate people whose lives were a constant reminder to me that I could not paint Christians with such broad strokes. There were, I fear, rare’.

avoided and/or refuted any evidence which positively affirmed God’s existence’. Half (25/50; 50%) reportedly ‘were not actively seeking or avoiding truth about God’.

Figure 17. Atheists' Openness to Belief in God



Overall, a negative stereotyping of religious belief, Christianity, and Christians existed in the minds of the former Atheists. With loss of cultural and intellectual plausibility, Christianity became easily dismissed. ‘Religion is absorbed into the night in which all cats are grey’ as per Berger’s analysis. No serious hearing of Christianity or Christians was granted by the Atheist. Once designated as implausible, Christianity’s ability to contend for intellectual respectability was lost in the Atheists’ negative perception. Amanda stated, ‘I just had this impression that no intelligent person really believes this stuff...When you think that way, before they even speak anything, you’ve already dismissed them’.

6.3.2.2. Knowability and Conviction of Atheism

The perceived strength of Atheism potentially depended upon confidence in its knowability. An individual’s ability to know and possess warrant of God’s non-existence remains epistemologically challenging for the naturalistic Atheist due to the inherent difficulty of proving a negative reality. Omniscience would be required. Further, a naturalistic, determined reality undermines confidence in trusting human rationality in the

discovery of objective truths and providing adequate warrant for beliefs. Despite its epistemological challenge, many Atheists possessed a high level of confidence in and grounding of the naturalistic worldview. Many Atheists held to confidence in the naturalistic worldview as supreme and epistemologically sufficient to rule out a transcendent or supernatural reality, particularly through science. In his interview, Greg stated,

I think that part of it came from my background in education and science. I took a Bachelor of science in biology. I had always been an avid science enthusiast growing up. As a teenager, I read all of Carl Sagan's books. I was an amateur astronomer. And *science for me was the only answer for how you want to understand anything in the world.*

So that definitely fed into the contemptuousness because I think I regarded people who were religious as - they just don't understand science. They can't appreciate science. Either they are ignorant or stupid. Or things like that, I think. I was a champion of the scientific worldview. People were just undereducated, I guess. It was some mixture of those kinds of things.

Moreover, Atheists often refused to acknowledge burden of proof for the Atheist perspective asserting that the burden lies solely upon positive assertions for supernatural reality.

Importantly, the question of epistemology (how an individual comes to know or acquire beliefs) is different than questions of truth (whether or not a truth claim is intellectually, rationally, evidentially viable). Thus, an individual's degree of confidence in held presuppositions potentially contributed to their willingness to consider an alternative explanation. Generally speaking, if confidence level is high in held presuppositions, resistance towards change may be comparably elevated. Similarly, if confidence is tentative or low, a greater degree of openness towards others' perspectives may be allowed. Atheists often proclaim lack of evidence for God. However, strongly held presuppositions may prevent an openness towards consideration of alternate perspectives and potential evidence. For philosopher Dallas Willard (2012), naturalistic presuppositions can undermine the pursuit of knowledge beyond the closed universe perspective. He states, 'If you believe from the outset there is no knowledge [beyond naturalistic materialism], you won't seek it. Then your belief that there is no knowledge will confirm itself.' However, willingness can be affected by other than confidence in held worldview.

The survey assessed participants' awareness and/or 'knowability' of their Atheistic position - whether and how it is known. First, when asked whether Atheism is 'knowable' (Q12), nearly one-third of the respondents (16/50; 32.0%) responded that Atheism is 'knowable, objective and rational' with 'no doubt that God does not exist'. Slightly less than one-third (15/50; 30.0%) thought that Atheism was 'essentially unknowable;' one-third (15/50; 30.0%) thought it was 'questionable or tentative' and they 'doubted their Atheism at times'.¹⁵² A comparable number of respondents (14/50; 28.0%) questioned the certainty of knowledge regarding God's existence due to human limitations. Although slightly more than half of the respondents asserted a 'strong' form of Atheism (55%), only one-third (28%) expressed a high level of epistemological confidence underlying such belief (in Q16 below).

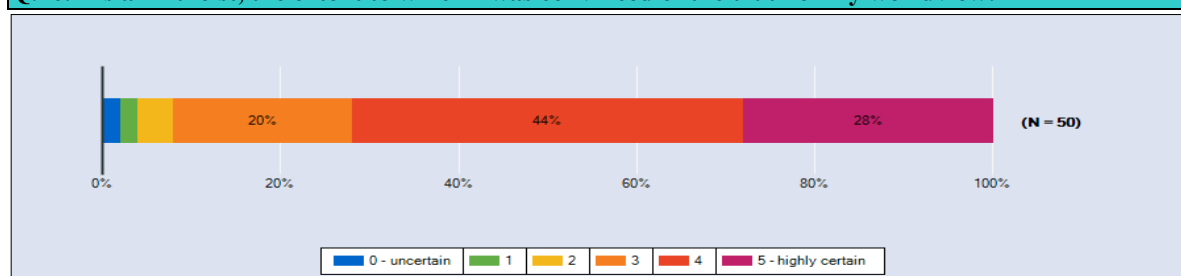
Secondly, respondents were asked as to how they knew God does not exist (Q12). Approximately half were Atheists due to logical reasoning (27/50; 54.0%) and scientific investigation (23/50; 46.0%). One-third (18/50; 36.0%) reported Atheism as 'the only possible option,' as 'truth excluded any supernatural or transcendent reality'. Others (14/50; 28.0%) claimed to experientially know that God did not exist. Four (4/50; 08.0%) added 'other' responses affirming truth of Atheism due to scientism,¹⁵³ naturalism's rational plausibility, as well as the evidential problem of evil. Finally, based upon perceived strength of and confidence in Atheism, the respondents asserted the extent to which they were convinced of the truth of their pre-conversion Atheistic perspective (Q16). The majority (36/50; 72%) were either highly convinced (14/50; 28.0%) or moderately convinced (22/50; 44.0%) on a scale from 'uncertain' to 'highly certain'. This confidence in Atheism exceeded perceived confident knowledge of God's non-existence, as previously cited. However, individuals generally hold beliefs for more than mere rational justification. Functional reasons support this confidence.

¹⁵² This question allowed for multiple responses. Some respondents held that Atheism was essentially unknowable as well as questionable/tentative; however, others diverged and held to either one or the other of these answers in combination with other responses. Regardless, the uncertainty reflected herein was noteworthy.

¹⁵³ Scientism, generally speaking, is the reductionistic belief that the only viable knowledge is discovered and/or known via the scientific method.

Figure 18. Conviction of Atheism

Q.16. As an Atheist, the extent to which I was convinced of the truth of my worldview:



6.3.2.3. Substantive Contemplation of Atheism

All ideologies affirm basic presuppositions regarding ultimate questions as pertaining to the physical nature (presence, origin, information within, apparent design and purpose of the universe) and human nature (presence, origin, purpose/value, destiny, meaning, morality). From a substance intellectual perspective, respondents reported contemplation of the intellectual loss of objective grounding for morality (18/50; 36.0%), for rationality and truth (9/50; 18.0%), for free will (8/50; 16.0%);¹⁵⁴ and, for consciousness (6/50; 12.0%) within the Atheistic worldview. Two-fifths (21/50; 42.0%) thought Atheism provided firm, rational answers to issues of life and reality.¹⁵⁵ Subjects seriously considered intellectual explanations for the origin of the universe and origin of life (15/50; 30.0%)¹⁵⁶ as well as possible reality (or lack) beyond the material universe (14/50; 28.0%). Approximately one-fifth (11/50; 22.0%) (Q14) justified the negative implications of Atheism; and, slightly more than four of every ten subjects (21/50; 42.0%) ignored the negative implications of their

¹⁵⁴ Interview: Acknowledging his loss of individual free will, Anthony stated, ‘On the issue of free will, I was a determinist. I thought that free will was an illusion. I think about that less when I’m telling my story, but I guess that was part of the whole nihilistic package that I bought into. I didn’t believe in free will’. Jeremy expressed a cognitive disconcertion with this apparent loss: ‘Because if I even wanted to pretend to be a naturalist, I had to concede one hundred percent that I am not thinking, that I am not acting. That to me just did not mesh with reality.’

¹⁵⁵ SoGoSurvey (Q15): As an example, Jacob enjoyed the intellectual rationality of Atheism, remarking, ‘It was satisfying to establish a rational truth and the feeling of victory was affirming after adopting a naturalistic worldview that dispelled a ‘primitive’ mindset’.

¹⁵⁶ SoGoSurvey: Regarding her felt cognitive dissonance relative to the origin and presence of the universe, Melissa stated, ‘Why is there something rather than nothing? I had no answer, so the question really bugged me’. Anthony similarly stated on interview, ‘As for the origin of the universe, I guess you could say I was a bit agnostic as to the cause of it. I wasn’t certain that we had any sort of naturalistic explanation, but I wasn’t convinced that God was behind it either. But I was saying like “Here’s an intriguing thing. What is behind it? Maybe someday we will know.” But I guess I wasn’t convinced by any answers that I had’.

Atheistic worldview.¹⁵⁷ When asked whether he thought about any negative aspects of

Atheism, Justin stated,

Not at all. The way I phrase it is that if the smart people around me didn't believe that, and didn't do anything about the existence of God, there was not even a motivation to think about the issues. It is like a settled question. Why even bother? Why even think about those matters? So, it was a very different Atheism than the French existentialist Atheists.

Overall, this data suggests that the Atheists' felt satisfaction connected with their awareness of or experience with the logical and lived implications of their own worldview. While many reported a positive sense of satisfaction within Atheism prior to conversion, slightly more than half (27/50; 54.0%) (Q15) 'did not find Atheism to be generally satisfying but soberly accepted it as truth'.¹⁵⁸ When reflection of the stark, deterministic implications of naturalism or experiential reality did not align with expectations, cognitive or emotional dissonance motivated openness for some towards finding a better explanation of reality.¹⁵⁹

6.3.3. Integrated, Reflective Reasons for Atheism

Subjects in this study were asked twice as to primary functional and substantive motivations informing their Atheism. Question 13 pursued the reasons participants gave 'as Atheists' motivating their Atheism; whereas, in Question 24 they were asked to reflect 'as Christians' as to causes underlying their prior Atheism. Both Function and Substance variables influenced disbelief in God, although Substantive Intellectual (SI) elicited the most responses on both questions.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ SoGoSurvey: Jessica stated, 'I mostly ignored and justified the implications, but occasionally wondered if there might be more to ultimate purpose and meaning in life, life after death, and reality beyond the physical/material universe.'

¹⁵⁸ SoGoSurvey (Q15): Scott stated, 'Early in my life, there was no alternative possible in my view. Later, it is not satisfying but was still the only option.' And, when options were available, Kyle continued to choose Atheism in spite of its lack of fulfillment: 'Even when Atheism didn't satisfy me, it still seemed more satisfying than belief in God.'

¹⁵⁹ Interview: Wrestling with the loss of objective truth, Paul described his cognitive dissonance: 'This actually makes no sense for me as a nihilist because we are dealing with truth claims which I believe didn't really exist. And then I thought, what an outrageously bonkers thing to actually, when I actually realized how could someone so smart, this was such a foolish thing to believe in is that I am going to make truth claims day in and day out and claim that the truth does not exist. That for me was, well, duh, light bulb moment. How could I miss something so fundamental? And then that got me into the whole issue of "What is truth?".'

¹⁶⁰ Spiritual Experiential (SE) was not included on this question.

Table 11. Reasons for Atheism in Retrospect

Q24. As a Christian looking back, my Atheism was primarily due to: (please select all that apply)			
Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
FUNCTION			
Personal reasons: desire to make life choices without moral restraint (mor)	21	42.0%	
Positive life experience: no perceived need of God (exp)	17	34.0%	
Social reasons: Influences from significant life relationships, social acceptability (soc)	15	30.0%	
Negative life experiences: personal pain and suffering fostered doubt and disappointment with God (exp)	13	26.0%	
Evil, pain, and suffering in the world caused doubt regarding God's existence (exp)	10	20.0%	
Professional / academic pressures for peer respect and/or promotion (voc)	2	4.0%	
SUBSTANCE			
Intellectual reasons: perceived rational superiority of Atheism over any other worldview (SI)	28	56.0%	
Intellectual reasons: perceived incompatibility between science and religious belief (SI)	27	54.0%	
Other (please specify)	11	22.0%	
(Did not answer)	0	0%	
Total Responses	147		

Over half affirmed Atheism due to its perceived rationally superior grounding (28/50; 56.0%) (Q24) and perceived incompatibility of science with religious belief (27/50; 54.0%) (Q24). (The prior reported subjective experiential aspect of Atheism was not included as part of these questions.) Three respondents specifically reiterated their lack of exposure to knowledgeable, intelligent Christians, lack of knowledge of Christian beliefs and apologetics as well as a misunderstanding of ‘faith as being contrary to reason’ in supporting their prior Atheism.¹⁶¹ Functional causes of Atheism continued to include the desire for moral freedom, perceived irrelevance for God, social pressure for conformity of Atheistic of belief as well as negative life experiences whether personally experienced or not.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Subjects Sean, Tyler, and Michelle, respectively. Jessica found the Christian belief system too conformist in nature, stating, ‘I was very turned off by a belief system that seemed to foster a sheep/conformist mentality, particularly when the Christian I ‘knew didn’t seem to have any idea why they believed what they did but still felt superior to everyone different from them.’

¹⁶² Functional causes, as commented on respondents to this question, included social influences (e.g., Atheism was taught and modeled by parents (Tom and George); reinforced by education (Susan) and desire for social acceptability: (e.g., ‘I didn’t want to believe that non-Christians would automatically go to hell. I wanted to be seen as accepting of everyone regardless of their alternative lifestyle.’); negative experiential influences (e.g., ‘My experiences with Christians were so negative overall that I just didn’t want anything to do with that label/belief system.’ (Jessica); ‘To me Christians were war mongering fools who used religion to get rich. Televangelists with Rolex watches and private jets made me sick.’ (James)

A closer comparison of responses for primary reasons given as an Atheist (Q13) versus as a Christian (Q24) revealed an interesting finding. Although minimal shift occurred in the assertion of substantive reasons for disbelief, more participants reported a higher functional influence for Atheism ‘as Christians looking back’ than was recognized and/or admitted during the time of their Atheistic belief.¹⁶³ Whereas only 4% declared solely functional impetus for Atheism initially (Q13), 25% recognized and affirmed a solely functional rationale when reflecting on authentic reasons for Atheism (Q24).

Table 12. Comparison of Primary Reasons for Atheism as an Atheist (Q13) versus Christian (Q24)

Primary Reasons for Atheism			
	% Substance Only	% Function Only	Both
Q13. As an Atheist , my primary reason(s) for disbelief in God and Christianity was/were:	12%	4%	84%
Q24. As a Christian looking back , my Atheism was primarily due to:	14%	25%	61%

This shift may be due to the robust assertion of Atheism’s rational superiority and intellectual grounding by its most vocal proponents, with functional reasons generally held to be secondary. Nevertheless, functional influence towards disbelief plays a greater role than perhaps is admitted by the Atheist in the substantiation of his/her worldview. Both queries required biographical reflection as to the perceived and/or real motivations and influences affecting their prior Atheistic belief. Regardless, this interesting shift in ‘perceived’ (as an Atheist) and ‘real’ (in hindsight) motivations provides an interesting insight as to the nature of disbelief (i.e., desire to rationalize an emotionally, morally, and/or socially driven decision).

6.4. Conclusion, Atheist Stage Informed by Substance and Function Variables

This research confirms motivations for Atheism include both Function and Substance influences and that educated Atheists’ dismiss Christianity for these primary reasons: (1) positive personal experience, education, freedom, opportunity, social or vocational affirmation, sensed justification and/or desire for Atheism; (2) substantive *a priori*

¹⁶³ For example, consideration of moral constraint associated with religion yielded increase of 9.10% (from 34.04% (Q13) to 44.0% (Q24) as an influence towards disbelief) in retrospect.

naturalistic materialistic presuppositions excluding a potential supernatural reality; (3) lack of personal, subjective evidence for God; (4) functional reinforcement of diminished and/or absent perceived socio-cultural, moral, and/or intellectual plausibility or attraction towards religious people and beliefs; (5) lack of personal desire or willingness to consider religious belief as a viable option; (6) lack of exposure to authentic forms of Christian belief, grounding, and lived expression; (7) negative life experiences and/or perception of incompatibility of suffering/evil and the existence of a good, knowing, powerful God; and/or (8) negative experience with Christians or Christianity. Atheists within this study desired intellectual honesty, respect, adherence to the naturalistic paradigm, social acceptance, and personal autonomy. For most, Atheism was the only perceived rational, reasonable, scientific, acceptable, moral, or desired option. This naturally led to closed posturing towards belief in God and Christianity.

Investigation of thesis question B1 inquiring as to the presence, role and timing of Substance and/or Function variables at the Atheist Stage confirmed an integrated, positive presence of both Substance and Function variables as influential towards disbelief in God and/or Christianity. Based on this data, Atheism entails complex influential factors.¹⁶⁴ Each person presented a different narrative and combination of influences, unique in motivation, strength, and expression. This finding suggests that conversion from Atheism to Christianity may comparably engage mixed motivations and experiences. The next chapter continues the investigation of thesis question B1 reporting the quantitative analysis of Substance and Function influence at the Catalyst and Conversion Stages.

¹⁶⁴ SoGoSurvey (Q33): Sean described ‘different types of skepticism and objections: 1) Spiritual questions about God, the afterlife, the supernatural, etc.; 2) Moral - values, truth, justice, fairness 3) Scientific – origin of the universe, evolution, faith vs. reason, etc.; 4) Biblical – authenticity, reliability, relevance, authority, etc.’

7.0. QUANTITATIVE and QUALITATIVE ANALYSES: CATALYST and CONVERSION STAGES

7.1. Introduction







Ideological paradigm shifting, the process of ‘changing your mind’ from one set of beliefs to another, typically entails a multi-dimensional process. Thesis question B1 investigates the presence, role and timing of Function and Substance as components of religious conversion. In this chapter, quantitative survey results are presented from the Catalyst and Conversion Stages and supplemented with qualitative interview examples.

7.2. Function Influences towards Religious Conversion

7.2.1. Function Influences, Catalyst Stage

In this study, the Catalyst Stage is defined as a time period (momentary – prolonged phase) whereby a person becomes more willing to consider an alternative point of view as prompted by functional and/or substantive influences. On the survey, Function variables positively influenced respondents at the Catalyst Stage but not at the level presumed by previously cited conversion theories and models (Chapter 2). When respondents were asked (Q18) as to primary reasons for ‘asking questions about Christianity’, Function responses yielded 6.0% to 24.0% presence, ranging across functional social, emotional, experiential, and existential variables:

Table 13. Q18 Function Variables, Catalyst Stage

Q18. As an Atheist, I began asking questions about Christianity in order to: (please select all that apply)			
FUNCTION			
resolve growing tensions between my worldview and my emotional well-being. (emot)	12	24.0%	
seek greater meaning, purpose, and happiness in my life (exist)	11	22.0%	
satisfy a significant relationship(s) in my life (soc/emot)	10	20.0%	
cope with a significant life crisis (exp/emot)	8	16.0%	
find a sense of belonging, acceptance, and social community (soc)	3	6.0%	
Other (please specify)	4	%	

7.2.1.1. Function Variables: Volitional Will, Catalyst Stage

In order to move towards conversion, a person must be willing to consider an alternate perspective.¹⁶⁵ If emotionally, intellectually or willfully resistant, they often refuse or oppose serious consideration of another point of view regardless of counter arguments and experiences. The majority of Atheists in this research study held high confidence in their pre-conversion perspective and were generally resistant to change. Nearly two-thirds (31/50; 62.0%) (Q17) reported as Atheists that no evidence would be sufficient to change their views.¹⁶⁶ This resistance was due to a variety of objections, both functional and substantive.¹⁶⁷ However, these same Atheists converted despite their personal inclinations,¹⁶⁸ socio-culturally absorbed hostility towards theism,¹⁶⁹ intellectual skepticism, or even proposed anxiety-driven resistance against God.¹⁷⁰ Only a small contingent held an open posture regarding the potential reality of God or admiration towards the Christian faith at the

¹⁶⁵ Exceptions include conversions whereby a resistant person experiences an unanticipated numinous experience prompting them towards sudden recognition of the reality of God and/or Jesus Christ and concurrent sudden change in personal will to believe.

¹⁶⁶ On interview, Justin reported resistance due to his *a priori* naturalistic presumptions about reality as well as his substantive rejections of the reliability of the religious text. He stated, 'There was some resistance and I can specify that a bit more for you. The degree of resistance I had was both the fact that I had no place in my worldview for the existence of God or the possibility of miracles. So obviously any talk by Jesus of those matters seemed to be excluded as an *a priori* exclusion. But also, in my most honest moments, I would say the degree of openness I may have had to anything he said or did, the miracles or the talks of God, was stifled by my assumption that if I would ever have to believe in these things, this document [the Bible] was not reliable enough to anchor beliefs in those kinds of wonderful things. That is, there are claims made in there...Even as an unbeliever it was very clear that if I ever were to have to believe those things, I would need to be able to provide solid gold reasons as to why I believe them. And it was clear to me that I did not have those reasons.'

¹⁶⁷ On interview, Kyle reported both substantive and functional reasons informing his resistance, stating, 'Maybe people like Dawkins are right when they say there's no evidence and that sort of stuff. And that is a genuine question, even if there is an insincere desire there as well. It just didn't look plausible. So, it was definitely both, finding it to be unattractive and not wanting it to be true, but also having some things that didn't quite make sense...There was definitely both. There was definitely an interplay between that genuine intellectual doubt and less admirable personal biases against it. I'm sure it was both of those.'

¹⁶⁸ On interview, Sean expressed a high level of personal resistance against spirituality and belief in God, stating, 'I did not choose God. There is nothing about me that wanted me to read the Bible, to study the Bible and really learn about it. There was nothing about me that wanted to find God or believe in God or know Jesus. I chose the opposite of that. I chose against God. I chose 'screw the Bible'. I chose 'I don't want to know anything about God, that's stupid'. I chose 'I don't want to have anything to do with your religion, that's stupid'. That's what I chose. So really for me to say that I really did anything would be wrong. It was all God. And thank God! I thank God that God chose me because I would not have chosen him. And if he would have let me, I would have gone screaming and crawling away, but he did not let me. He showed up on a horse, a white horse, sword and pistol by his side, big muscles, and He grabbed me by the hair, by the neck, by the face and wasn't going to take no for an answer. That was my first impression of God.'

¹⁶⁹ On interview, Aaron described his perceived cultural attitude towards religious belief, stating, 'We are very hostile [in our culture] there are two basic premises to Atheism [per Doug Wilson]: (1) There is no God, and (2) I hate him. I think that the approach that people have. They think they are being neutral but actually they don't want God to exist. They don't want the world to be like that. That's where a lot of people start off.'

¹⁷⁰ On interview, Anthony contemplated, 'And, it has always struck me that there are deep similarities there between naturalism and extreme forms of anxiety where like a person doesn't trust something because there is a remote possibility that it is not true.'

Atheist Stage, appreciating its emotional, moral, and social aspects.¹⁷¹ A small number (6/50; 12.0%) (Q17) ‘wanted to believe that Christianity was true but couldn’t’;¹⁷² and, ten participants (10/50; 20.0%) (Q17) ‘seriously considered evidence and depth of thought presented by Christian writers and thinkers’.¹⁷³ Still others were willing to explore beyond naturalism, but not in the direction of Christianity.¹⁷⁴ Approximately 8% (4/50) of respondents explored alternative forms of spirituality prior to being willing to consider Christianity. Recent models presume and profile the convert as an active seeker, questing towards religious conversion. However, in this study few subjects (7/50; 14.0%) (Q17) reported they ‘actively, authentically searched for the truth about God’ or were ‘actively seeking belief’ in Christianity (8/50; 16.0%) (Q27o). Half (25/50; 50.0%) (Q17) affirmed that they were ‘neither actively seeking nor avoiding the truth about God’ but were often hostile against Christians and Christianity.¹⁷⁵ One-quarter of the respondents asserted that they were ‘not asking questions about Christianity prior to conversion’ (12/50; 24.0%) (Q18) nor ‘actively seeking belief in Christianity’ (34/50; 68.0%) (Q27j).¹⁷⁶ During the Atheist Stage, the majority demonstrated resistance against religious belief along with a lack of spiritual questing. This raises curious questions as to what eventually caused an openness and movement towards another perspective? At the Catalyst Stage, research findings confirmed a change in volitional will allowed an open interest for some and continued skepticism for

¹⁷¹ SoGoSurvey (Q17): Emotionally, 11/50; 22.0% desired the meaningful, contented lives of Christians; morally, 6/50; 12.0% appreciated the moral integrity of Christians; and socially, 7/50; 13.73% enjoyed close relationships with Christians.

¹⁷² On interview, despite his functional attraction to religious belief, Richard explained his resistance due to lack of substantive grounding. He stated, ‘I thought it would be wonderful if a great God loved, accepted me, but that’s a long way from taking theism seriously as a fact.’

¹⁷³ SoGoSurvey (Q17): Michelle reported an attraction towards the Christian worldview through the works of art and literature.









¹⁷⁴ On interview, James stated, ‘I never wanted to investigate Christianity. I felt that if there was to be any truth, it would be in something other. I didn’t think it would be religious. I was not spiritual at all.’

¹⁷⁵ SoGoSurvey, (Q17): An attitude of contemptuousness towards Christians and Christianity appeared prominent among several participants. Timothy qualified this response by stating, ‘I wasn’t actively looking for things to refute the existence of God himself, but definitely embraced every opportunity to confirm that Christians were generally ignorant and awful people.’

¹⁷⁶ SoGoSurvey (Q27j): Interestingly, nearly half (25/50; 50.0%) reported no active seeking was involved in formulation of their Atheistic worldview/identity.

others.¹⁷⁷ It may be argued that the lack of reported intentional questing reported at the Atheist Stage was countered at or following the Catalyst Stage when respondents became more open towards change. When asked as to how they were most attracted to or convinced of Christianity (Q23), the prominent Functional variable was the role of volitional will in opening oneself to ask God to reveal himself (38%) along with existential need, personal life crisis, positive experience(s) with Christians, and ‘deciding to open myself to truth’ (22%).

Table 14. Q23 Function Variables, Catalyst Stage

Q23. As an Atheist, the most effective means by which I was attracted to and/or convinced of the Christian faith was through: (please select all that apply)			
Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
FUNCTION			
intentionally ask God to reveal himself, to reveal truth (will)	19	38.0%	
searching for meaning and purpose in life (exist)	14	28.0%	
the personal care and concern from a Christian (soc/emot/exp)	12	24.0%	
observing Christians' lives (soc)	11	22.0%	
making a decision to open myself to truth (will)	11	22.0%	
experiencing a personal life crisis (exp/emot)	9	18.0%	
joining in religious activities (soc)	6	12.0%	
Other (please specify)	3	6.0%	

Typically, an individual’s resistant will was softened through experiential, positive encountering with or surprising exposure to religious ideas and/or persons who undermined their predetermined negative religious presumptions and stereotypes. However, a change in openness was not necessary prior to all conversions.¹⁷⁸

7.2.1.2. Function Variables: Existential, Emotional, Experiential, Catalyst Stage

Looking more closely, existential, emotional, and experiential influences contributed to openness towards another point of view. Motivated by existential need, nearly one-third

¹⁷⁷ SoGoSurvey (Q18): For example, when respondents were asked why they began asking questions about Christianity, Subject #03 stated, [I was] ‘willing to listen but still hypercritical’.

¹⁷⁸ On interview: When Susan was asked whether or not she was ‘seeking’ or asking questions about God, she succinctly, adamantly asserted, ‘No. Never. Never.’ Rather, Susan encountered an unexpected spiritual experience, suddenly prompting belief and conversion.

(11/50; 22.0%) (Q18); (14/50; 28.0%) (Q23) to two-thirds (34/50; 68.0%) (Q26j) began to search for greater meaning and purpose in life.¹⁷⁹ Greg stated,

Prior to my actual conversion, it was a combination of being around Christians, kind of getting older into your 30s and realizing, starting to perceive your mortality a little bit more. You're getting older and you are realizing *the fear of nothingness, of emptiness, of meaninglessness was a huge driver*. It was just thinking, 'Why go through the struggle, the grind, the meaninglessness of toiling away, of working so hard to achieve things that will just vanish anyway? You are going to die.

It felt like building a sand castle along the beach at low tide knowing that the tide is going to come in and wipe it out. *That was a huge driver, the search for meaning. And it really made me a lot more open to being, to listen. I had to ask myself. And I'm willing to consider another point of view in that mine has nothing to offer.* I didn't delight in the intellectual superiority of it anymore. *I think just reflecting on the futility of life as an Atheist was something that really laid the groundwork for me to investigate something else.*

When asked to recall any appealing aspects of Christianity (as Atheists) (Q22) one-third acknowledged Christianity's offerings of personal purpose and value (19/50; 38.0%), joy, peace, hope and security (18/50; 36.0%),¹⁸⁰ assurance of life after death (17/50; 34.0%), and contentment/satisfaction in life (14/50; 28.0%). Only five respondents (5/50, 10.0%) reported 'comfort and compassion' as appealing. Interestingly, slightly more than one-third valued 'forgiveness and acceptance by God' (17/50; 34.0%) as well as a 'personal relationship with God' (18/50; 36.0%). A 'desire for more' in life along with an awareness of Christianity's offerings served as a catalyst towards seeking towards conversion.

Emotionally-driven catalysts prompted varied responses (Q18, Q23, and Q26). One-quarter of participants (12/50; 24.0%) (Q23) encountered positive interaction, specifically 'the personal care and concern from a Christian' as attractive towards Christianity, fostering an emotional openness towards God.¹⁸¹ Approximately one-quarter of respondents (12/50;

¹⁷⁹ On interview: Dennis stated, 'The lack of ultimate purpose in life [as an Atheist] gave me some minimal interest in the possibility of the theistic worldview.'

¹⁸⁰ SoGoSurvey (Q22): James stated, 'I was miserable, and I knew it. The peace Christianity offered was appealing.'

¹⁸¹ On interview, Jeff described a long-standing contempt against God and Christians, worsening after his wife unexpectedly became a Christian. However, a personal encounter with Christians surprised and diffused some of his resistance. He described the initial interaction: 'I ended up going over to this house. I walked in where [my wife] was with a couple of Christians and they said, 'Would you like a cup of coffee?' And it immediately disarmed me. I wasn't expecting it. I was ready to erupt. They offered me a cup of coffee and they sat there and talked to me like I mattered. And they didn't talk about Jesus and they didn't talk about God at all. I left there at 3 o'clock in the morning. They just welcomed me and talk to

24.0%) (Q18) were motivated to find answers outside of Atheism to resolve emotional tensions.¹⁸² Search for emotional fulfillment led half of the respondents (25/50; 50.0%) (Q26m) towards Christianity. Attachment theory suggests individuals move towards religious belief in order to compensate for or complement their existing parent/child relationship, longing for attachment with a surrogate ‘heavenly parent’. On self-assessment, a small minority reported movement towards Christianity due to a ‘troubled or absent relationship’ with their mother (1/50; 2.0%; 26d) or father (2/50; 4.0%; 26e). Alternatively, a ‘healthy relationship’ with their mother contributed towards religious conversion for eight subjects (6/50; 12.0%; 26c); and, a ‘healthy relationship’ with their father influenced seven subjects (6/50; 12.0%; 26i) towards conversion. Although contributory for a minority, this finding does not support attachment theory for the majority of respondents.

Experiential motivators also served as catalysts towards religious conversion. According to past and contemporary religious conversion model(s) life crisis serves as the foundational facilitator towards openness and change. This research affirmed positive and negative life experiences contributed towards conversion for the minority of respondents. Gary reported deep anger towards God due to a history of childhood abuse. His neck broken in an accident and hospitalized, he recalled the positive impact a caretaker had in creating an openness towards God:

So, here’s where my conversion starts. My first morning in the hospital, this nurse wakes me up, and she says, ‘Would you mind if I prayed for you?’ And I said, ‘I don’t want you to do that. I don’t believe in God.’ And she grabs my hand and starts praying for me in a very, very kind way. It wasn’t like, ‘Shut your mouth while I pray.’ She just kind of smiled and she took my hand and then she bowed her head and started praying. I was looking at her. And it was a really sweet prayer, like she was a sweet, sweet person. I was really touched by that and I didn’t know why.

So, I was having this ambivalent feeling of, ‘I really like her, but I don’t want her to do this. It is not what I believe.’ But it wasn’t like, ‘She’s forcing

me like I was human. They welcomed me into their home. They treated me like I was a human. They listen to what I was saying even though we didn’t talk about God at all...So I kept going back and forth there because I was intrigued why these people who were Christians.’

¹⁸² An example of emotional dissatisfaction within the naturalistic Atheistic worldview would be if/as an individual’s genuine experience of emotions (i.e., love) seemed as more than mere meaningless chemical or neurological reaction. Nine respondents (9/50; 18.0%; 26b) affirmed their ‘low sense of self-esteem’ as contributory towards belief in Christianity.

herself on me and I feel uncomfortable.’ It was like ‘There’s something good about her.’ And so, then she finishes her prayer. And she goes, ‘Do you mind if I read you the Bible?’ ‘I told you, I don’t believe in God. I don’t believe in the Bible.’ And she goes, ‘That’s okay.’ And she just read to me. Every morning, right? She thought I was going to die so she is sharing Christ with me, right? Just so kind and so encouraging... So that night, I prayed my first prayer.

Positive life experiences led one-third of participants (16/50; 32.0%; 26l) towards Christianity.¹⁸³ Negative life experiences led approximately one-fourth (12/50; 24.0%; 26k) towards Christianity. Significant life crisis prompted less than twenty percent of subjects (8/50; 16.0%) (Q18); (9/50; 18.0%) (Q23)¹⁸⁴ towards religious belief. Similarly, ‘illness, death, or personal trauma’ reportedly contributed for one-fourth (13/50; 26.0%) (26a);¹⁸⁵ and, ‘divorce or relationship breakup’ contributed for six respondents (6/50; 12.0%) (Q26h). These findings agree that life crisis is a trigger towards conversion for some but is not essential for conversion as some models suggest. Susan acknowledged the non-crisis nature of her conversion, stating,

It was incredibly radical. And, there was nothing going on in my life. I wasn’t lying in the gutter with a needle in my arm or anything. That’s how I always thought all of this stuff happened. That’s what I always thought, that something must be going on that would make you put it all on works, so why would I understand grace? I had no concept of grace. I had no concept election. I had no concept of anything.

In light of these results, both crisis and non-crisis catalysts should be included in considering a path towards religious conversion.

7.2.1.3. Function Variables: Social, Catalyst Stage

Social influences also played a role towards religious conversion. One-fifth (10/50; 20.0%) (Q18) reported openness to Christianity ‘in order to satisfy a significant relationship’ and twenty-two subjects (22/50; 44.0%) (Q26f) ‘in order to satisfy a spouse or significant

¹⁸³ Due to the generic nature of this question, it is uncertain as to whether subjects attributed positive life experience towards life generally or as related to positive interactions with Christians causing influence towards conversion. However, on a subsequent query one-third of respondents (18/50; 36.0%) (Q28a) reported negative interactions with Christians moved them towards disbelief/Atheism.

¹⁸⁴ James reached a particularly low point in life prior to conversion recalled, ‘[I] was not interested until a crisis came in my life and I was at least willing to listen.’

¹⁸⁵ Interestingly, a slightly higher percentage of subjects (15/50; 30.0%) (26a) moved towards Atheism due to illness, death or personal trauma.

relationship'. Only three participants (3/50; 6.0%) (Q18) pursued Christianity in order to find a sense of social belonging, and five subjects (5/50; 10.0%) (28f) reported social acceptance as a motivator towards religious conversion.¹⁸⁶ A minority (6/50; 12.0%) (Q28g) 'felt pressured towards belief' in Christianity.¹⁸⁷

Both surveys and interviews revealed that the majority were positively influenced towards openness to Christianity through social interaction (although not intentionally pursuing social benefit). Respondents engaged with Christians who neutralized and/or reversed pre-conceived negative caricatures of religious belief and believers prompting them to reconsider their perspective. Remarkably, eight of ten respondents (41/50; 82.0%) (Q28a), a strong majority, reported positive social encounters with a Christian as contributory towards their conversion to Christianity. Anthony stated (Q18), 'I always asked questions about Christianity, but I suppose that questioning turned into a more robust 'seeking' after I became close friends with some Christians who had something about them.' A high school teacher, William, chaperoned a field trip with another Christian teacher whom he did not know or like. After an unanticipated encounter, he became open towards God. He recalls,

And what was different about him, he is a very humble sort of character, and that was also disarming. So, I was prepared to get into a real fight, into an argument and he wasn't that type. And I found that this whole experience quite strange because I had spent an hour talking to him and I realized that he is a really nice person, and I enjoyed having this conversation, and he made me think about some things that I had not really thought about.

He certainly didn't convert me in that conversation. But what he did was break down some barriers for me...He certainly didn't convert me, but it was an eye-opener. This interaction became the first of many ongoing discussions that led towards religious conversion. The majority of social influences included friends and/or family members¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ As an interesting contrast, four of ten respondents (22/50; 44.0%) (Q28f) initially sought Atheism as a means of social acceptance.

¹⁸⁷ Alternatively, nearly 20% (10/50; 19.60%) (Q28g) 'felt pressured towards belief' in Atheism.

¹⁸⁸ By comparison, one-third of respondents (18/50; 36.0%) (Q28b) were led towards Atheism through friends and/or family's lives.

(26/50; 52.0%) (28b) and/or religious discussions with friends or family members¹⁸⁹ (34/50; 68.0%) (28c).

Social benefits valued by a minority included ‘social belonging and new community’ (9/50; 18.0%) (Q22). A prominent social means of intentional questing towards Christianity was through church attendance. Slightly more than half (26/50; 52.0%) (Q19) began seeking answers through ‘going to church or religious event’ to explore Christianity for a single service and/or for a period of time. Attending church service(s) contributed towards changed perspectives of Christians and Christianity through social interaction and experiential engagement.¹⁹⁰ On initially attending church service, Todd recalled,

It was not what I expected. I was definitely caught off guard. That was a recurring theme, being caught off guard because a lot of assumptions had been built in my mind. I was building my worldview on things that I thought were true; and, a lot of things became untrue when I got plugged into the local church I was in.

Anonymity rather than social interaction in church service was valued among some exploring Atheists.¹⁹¹ Jessica described her apprehension of any social acknowledgement or interaction:

I went to [church service] and I came in late and sat in the back. I left early so I wouldn’t have to talk to anybody which didn’t work because the guest services people are out there, and you are really conspicuous because you are leaving early. I realized that I could go and be anonymous and that’s what I wanted.

Some respondents described a sense of social shame of attending church service as an

Atheist. Justin recalled his apprehension at attending his first church service:

The whole thing was awkward from the point that everything was new and by the fact that *if anybody would have even seen me consider Christianity, I would die of shame*. I was really oppressed by those feelings, *if anybody of my*

¹⁸⁹ By comparison, one-third of respondents (16/50; 32.0%) (Q28c) were led towards Atheism due to religious discussion with friends and/or family members.

¹⁹⁰ On interview: On a first visit to church, Justin described personal embarrassment (as an Atheist) at being present in a church service as well as surprise that the Christian attendees appeared to sincerely believe what they professed. He recalled, ‘I don’t remember what they prayed for, but I remember it being both awkward and impressively coherent. At least these people believe God is listening and they are praying. I think that is a pretty good mix, actually. For an Atheist I found it awkward and unbelievable, but for a Christian, at least you believed what you are saying is good, especially when I was growing up in a church environment where it seemed that half of the people didn’t believe this stuff.’

¹⁹¹ On interview, Ben said, ‘And I guess over the break I was thinking, ‘What’s missing? What am I supposed to do now?’ And at some point, I was like, ‘Well I haven’t been to church. That’s what Christians do. Maybe I’m supposed to go to church.’ Church was still kind of weird and scary to me. I don’t want to go and be like, ‘People are looking at me’ or something.’ Justin stated, ‘That’s when the service ended. I figured, well, I have done my investigative work. I have seen all of these people. I have an idea of what this looks like, now let me get out of here before anybody talks to me again and I have to introduce myself.’

friends or family would see me in a church, God forbid! They would laugh at me. I would die of shame. All of that made for very strange feelings in the beginning of church service.

Others attended church for prolonged periods in order to satisfy a significant relationship or were invited by a friend but were not initially seeking Christianity.¹⁹² One-half of respondents (25/50; 50.0%) (Q28h) participated in Christian group activities prior to their religious conversion, ‘belonging before belief.’ For nearly two-thirds of respondents, 31/50; 62.0%) (Q28d), attending a church service contributed to their religious conversion to Christianity. However, actively ‘joining in religious activities’ served as a convincing component towards conversion for only a small minority (6/50; 12.0%) (Q23). Still others were open to attend church service after a period of investigation prior to attendance.¹⁹³ Four of ten respondents (21/50; 42%) (28i), ‘believed before joining in group [church] activities.’ While affiliation and bonding with the new religious group was an important catalyst towards conversion for some, results in this study countered prominent religious conversion models presuming necessity and dominance of social influence preceding and informing religious conversion motivation and content. When the respondents attended church, the majority (three-quarters or more) they affiliated with an evangelical form of Protestantism (including five Pentecostal churches) before, during, and after conversion. Of those who attended, one-fourth attended mainline congregations (Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal). See church affiliation prior to, during, and following religious conversion:

¹⁹²A minority of respondents were introduced to Christianity through significant dating relationships and/or marriages. On interview: Todd stated, ‘I knew how hard that was for my wife to marry an Atheist and the tension that created in her family...She felt the pull to get involved in a local church. So, we went church shopping and I was reluctant, but I went.’

¹⁹³Jeremy recounted his initial period of church attendance: ‘But I was still very skeptical. I granted the intellectual possibility of a resurrection, but the idea of is there a personal God that actually interacts in the world today, that is the issue I was exploring as I was going to church. It was weird. I remember the first time I was running late, and I came to this church...it was such a trip for me to see 900 people standing in the dark with their eyes closed and their hands raised, and I was going, ‘What is going on here?’ The hair went up on the back of my neck. This felt like, ‘Where is the Kool Aid?’ It felt really weird. The pastor here is a former drug dealer and a product of the 60s, not the kind of person I would have expected, because I am a hard-core intellectual, but I liked the fact that he slowly, methodically teaches the Bible which is great to learn more about the history and that kind of stuff...So that phase, I was probably going to church regularly as a very curious agnostic for probably another six months or so.’

Table 15. Church Affiliation Prior to, During, and Following Conversion

Name	Pre-Conversion			Conversion			Post-Conversion		
	Mainline	Evangelical	Catholic	Mainline	Evangelical	Catholic	Mainline	Evangelical	Catholic
1 David								X	
2 Michael								X	
3 James								X	
4 John								X	
5 Chris					X			X	
6 Melissa		X						X	
7 Matthew								X	
8 Aaron								X	
9 Justin		X			X			X	
10 William								X	
11 Jeff								X	
12 Tom		X			X			X	
13 Sean							X		
14 Steven		X			X			X	
15 Nicholas							X		
16 Daniel				X			X		
17 Tyler					X			X	
18 Joshua								X	
19 Susan								X	
20 Joseph		X			X			X	
21 Adam							(X2)	X1	
22 Jessica		X			X			X	
23 Timothy					X			X	
24 Charles								X	
25 Kyle								X	
26 Brad		X			X			X	
27 Ashley		X			X		X1		(X2)
28 Amy		X			X			X	
29 Michelle	X			X			X1		(X2)
30 Ben								X	
31 Todd		X			X			X	
32 Dennis								X	
33 Greg								X	
34 Ed								X	
35 Paul					X			X	
36 Jeremy				X			X		
37 Heather					X		X		
38 Zach		X			X			X	
39 George								X	
40 Ryan					X		X		
41 Richard								X	
42 Carl	X			X			X		
43 Anthony								X	
44 Jennifer		X			X			X	
45 Jason				X			X		
46 Barbara	X			X			X		
47 Jacob		X			X			X	
48 Gary		X			X			X	
49 Amanda								X	
50 Scott							X		
TOTAL	3	14	0	6	19		12 (1)	38	(2)
% within Attendees	18%	82%		24%	76%		24%	76%	
% total (50)	6%	28%		12%	38%		24%	76%	
% total (50)	34%			50%			100%		

Three converts clarified that they converted to ‘mere Christianity’ and not to a church denomination. Half of the converts did not attend church until after conversion. Charles states,

No ‘specific form of Catholicism or Protestantism’ played any part in my conversion, simply C.S. Lewis’s presentation of that deposit of orthodox Christian truth (like the Nicene Creed) common to all the mainstream denominations - hence the title of his book *Mere Christianity*. *The ‘church’ in any traditional ‘institutional’ sense played no role in my conversion. Quite the opposite, in fact...*

What, I’m sure, *did* play a role in my conversion, were the prayers over a period of about 4 months of my future wife's Christian friends, and attendance at an informal Charismatic evening service in a Christian coffee house in Kensington (London), where my hostility to ‘church’ was disarmed by the beauty (physical and spiritual) of the young people present on that occasion, as well as by the lovely music and worship. All this made me willing to set aside my prejudices and start on my journey of open-minded investigation of the truth claims of Christianity, beginning with the works of C.S. Lewis.











The Christians in contact with me all this time were mainly Charismatic Evangelicals, and I began attending church semi-regularly in London within a few weeks of my conversion, and subsequently, every week after my marriage.

Two respondents reported they later ‘further converted’ from Mainline Protestantism to Catholicism after initial conversion.

7.2.2. Function Influences, Conversion Stage

Within this research, the Conversion Stage is defined as the time period (momentary – prolonged phase) whereby an individual reaches a point of belief, surrender, and personal life commitment to the reality of God within the context of Christianity. When asked as to primary reasons for conversion (Q29), Function variables ranged from 2.0%-48.0% as influential. At the Conversion Stage, nearly half of the respondents (24/50; 48.0%) (Q29) affirmed their ‘change in willingness to be open and to seek truth’ as the most prominent functional reason towards belief in God and Christianity.

Table 16. Q29 Function Variables, Conversion Stage

Q29. My primary reason(s) for changing towards belief in God and conversion to Christianity was/were: (please select all that apply)			
Responses	Count	%	% of total respondents
FUNCTION			
a change in my willingness to be open, to seek truth (will)	24	48.0%	
positive personal experience with religious people (soc/exp)	19	38.0%	
loving actions of Christians (soc/exp/emot)	16	32.0%	
positive emotional consequences, a sense of purpose, meaning, and fulfillment (emot/exist)	13	26.0%	
helps understand suffering in the lives of others (emot)	6	12.0%	
Christian church (soc)	5	10.0%	
positive social consequences, a sense of belonging (soc)	4	8.0%	
religious lives of Christian leaders (soc/exp)	3	6.0%	
helps deal with personal pain in my life (emot)	2	4.0%	
positive vocational consequences for belief (soc)	0	0.0%	
Other (please specify)	1	2.0%	

7.2.2.1. Function Variables: Existential and Emotional, Conversion Stage

From an existential, emotional perspective, only two subjects (2/50; 4.0%) (Q29) reported a primary reason for religious conversion as a coping mechanism to ‘deal with personal pain in my life’. Six subjects (6/50; 12.0%) (Q29) reported conversion as a way ‘to help understand suffering in the lives of others’. Religious conversion positively affected sense of purpose, meaning, and fulfillment for one-quarter of the respondents (13/50; 26.0%) (Q29). Conversely, one-third (17/50; 34.0%) (Q24) characterized themselves as ‘happy’ with ‘no felt need’ for God as Atheists.¹⁹⁴ Justin, a self-reported ‘happy Atheist’ directly rebuffed the idea that his conversion was prompted by emotional need. He recalled,

I had not too many worldly concerns in this life. As far as my own personal desires were going, I was on my way to be very, very happy on all fronts. I was sheltered by a family who was very loving and very nurturing. My mom was utterly devoted to her children, so I ended up doing very well in school, so I was respected on that field, and I ended up growing and becoming physical so I played volleyball in a national league so that was exciting too and I was playing music. *So, all of that seemed really fine... Why should I worry about such things when life is just good? It is a big slap in the face of the theory that people find religion only when life is miserable.*

Aaron, another ‘happy Atheist’ expressed a felt emotional difficulty in conversion:

¹⁹⁴Many expressed no intellectual need for God; others expressed no ‘felt’ need for God as exemplified by Aaron: Italics, principal investigator.

To believe in God would be a kind of complicated factor to your life because I had the impression that you would have to change the way you live, the way you thought. And, *I was quite happy with the way I was living so God was a hypothesis I had no need for. I just thought it complicated things. I was quite happy without God...But, I still thought I had no need for God. I was reasonably happy. I was content with how I was living, quite sort of hedonistic. It was a complication that actually sort of caused me a bit of grief.*

These stories suggest that although existential, emotional issues were motivating towards conversion for some respondents they were not motivating for all, especially for those whom conversion caused emotional or social distress.

7.2.2.2. Function Variables: Social, Conversion Stage

When social motivations were considered, only four subjects (4/50; 8.0%) (Q29) reported ‘positive social consequences, a sense of belonging’ as a primary contributor to religious conversion. This minority finding weighs heavily against naturalistic presumptions broadly characterizing conversion as essentially social phenomenon. Atheists tend to move against social conventions as demonstrated by their prior affirmation of and identification with a minority ideology (Atheism) within Western culture, prone to anti-conformity. Todd affirmed his social independence, stating, ‘I got to age 27 as an Atheist because I gave my middle finger, sometimes both, to the social contracts at war with me...I am much more prone to go the other way than to acquiesce just to say I could.’ Steven explicitly denied the need for social belonging as a motivator for conversion, stating,

I don’t belong to any church because I need to belong. In terms of me, that is fundamentally incorrect. I don’t go to church because I want to be with other Christians or because I need to be part of an organization. If you look at me through my past, you would see that I never participated in any organization like that for those purposes or reasons. So why would I all of a sudden start going to church? That explanation does not apply to me at all.¹⁹⁵

Conversion to Christianity moved against social norms for many subjects who reported pre-conversion social encouragement towards Atheistic belief, not Christianity.¹⁹⁶ Respondents

¹⁹⁵ Interview, Steven. Instead of social motivations, he reported to have been captivated by extraordinary providential answers to prayer on behalf of his terminally ill wife, convinced that there must be ‘something to it’; followed by openness, study and intellectual belief.

¹⁹⁶ Three-quarters of respondents (38/50; 74.50%) (Q25f) perceived their culture as encouraging belief towards Atheism; that social and political influences encourage belief in Atheism (39/50; 78.0%) (Q25h); and, that society places obstacles in the way of practicing Christianity (40/50; 80.0%) (Q25g).

reported social alienation by personal social groups following religious conversion. On interview narratives, nearly one-third of respondents (15/50; 30.0%) reported negative responses and/or rejection from friends and family post-conversion. When questioned about his friends' reactions to his and a close friend's conversion, Christopher stated,

We lost a lot of friends, honestly. Even then our beliefs were very liberal and, in some sense, more closely aligned with Atheism than with Christianity on all sorts of issues. *But just saying, 'We're going to church this Sunday,' or 'Jesus is God,' a lot of people hated us. I can remember that, just feeling really crappy that friends wouldn't even talk to us anymore because of that.*

It was difficult, and I think also though, there's kind of a new conversion joy that helped to get us through it. I had a pretty strong sense of peace about it considering how crappy it was. I mean by that point I was like, *'Okay I'm in this, I looked through this and Christianity is offering the only answers that are even close to coherent.'* I felt a lot of peace about that even though at the same time it was really crappy losing a bunch of friends.

Zach initially perceived his conversion as 'socially frowned upon, especially by my group of friends, and it was...belief in God was embarrassing for me'. Loss of social belonging and important relationships was a negative result of religious conversion for more respondents than reported a positive social benefit. Regardless, social engagement contributed towards religious conversion through activities such as church attendance (5/50; 10.0%) (Q29), joining in church small groups (7/50; 14.0%) (Q19) and positive personal experience with religious people (19/50; 38.0%) (Q29), and the 'loving actions of Christians' towards them (16/50; 32.0%) (Q29).

7.3. Substance Influences towards Religious Conversion

Substance influences were evaluated as to their presence, timing, and role in the conversion process. Two subcategories consisted of Substance Intellectual (SI) belief content (including rational, evidential grounding for the Christian worldview) and Spiritual Experiences (SE) (internal (SEi) and external (SEe)). Study participants believed reported spiritual experiences were 'real' as initiated by independent spiritual being(s).¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ See definitions of Substance Intellectual (SI), Spiritual Experiential (SE) on List of Definitions and/or Abbreviations page.

7.3.1. Substance Intellectual (SI) Influences

Although contributory, Function motivations were deemed insufficient to fully effect conversion for the majority of respondents. Many affirmed the need to substantively ground beliefs of Christianity regardless of functional benefit, as shown in Brad's sentiment:

The things that attracted me to the Christian worldview while I was still an Atheist were the truth of the claims being made and the voracity in which they stood up to scrutiny. *To me comfort or personal feelings were secondary to truth. I wanted, and still want to believe that which is true regardless of the personal implications.*

Joseph contended that his conversion was 'ontologically based, not simply socially or relationally useful'.¹⁹⁸ As an Atheist, Nicholas believed the Christian story to be beautiful but untrue, stating, 'Even if it looked appealing, I was convinced there was nothing to it.'¹⁹⁹ Still others denied personal gains of their conversion until afterwards..²⁰⁰ Zach summarized, 'And I remembered thinking "Yes but if it is not true, then I don't want to believe in it. If it is true, then there is something more to gain".'²⁰¹

Due to the skeptical nature of Atheists, many are driven towards rational support of religious beliefs. Doubt, for Jason, 'fueled my desire to look for evidence...I was looking for the answers...I wanted to be convinced but not to the point that I would say that I am going to ignore inconsistencies, or I am going to ignore things that I disbelieve. I didn't want to be convinced that badly.' Ben stated, 'For me, it would have been depressing to be following along but knowing in the back of my mind it is not really true. It is all just a sham. So, I wanted to know if it was actually true...If I can't reasonably believe in it then I don't want

¹⁹⁸ On interview: In context, Joseph stated, 'The only reason I get up on a Sunday morning and drag my wife and four children to church, which is not always easy, is because I believe there is a God who really is there. It is not simply using mythical language for moral lexicon. It's not simply creating a social setting that is conducive for middle-class families. I see myself as part of a story and part of God's story. And so, I would say everything I believe is ontologically based, not simply socially or relationally useful.'

¹⁹⁹ SoGoSurvey (Q22): Nicholas. Reflecting on the beauty of the Christian message, George questioned, 'I thought the Gospel, of Christ taking my punishment, freeing me for a relationship with God ingenious and beautiful, but was it true?'

²⁰⁰ SoGoSurvey (Q22): Dennis reflected, 'Until my conversion, I did not consider the potentially appealing personal aspects of Christianity.'

²⁰¹ On interview, justifying his Christian belief Zach recalled, '...probability wise, there is a 96% chance that Christ rose from the dead based upon all of the evidence, based upon all of the different arguments. And that is still the most secure thing to my faith, I think.'

to.’ Further, if Christian beliefs were not positively affirmed prior to conversion, substantive grounding was sought following conversion. New convert Ed prayed,

God, you seem more real to me than my next breath, but if I ever find out that you are not real or this stuff isn’t real, I’m not going to keep doing it...All I knew at the beginning was the Bible and my experience...I realized, not only is this stuff true and I would never walk away...If I ever walked away, it wouldn’t be because I was doubting that anything was intellectually true.

Due to the importance of ‘finding truth’ underlying Christian beliefs for the educated Atheist, this section puts forth findings regarding Substance Intellectual influence at the Catalyst and Conversion Stages.

7.3.1.1. Substance Intellectual, Catalyst Stage

At the Atheist Stage, respondents held confidence in their beliefs and sensed no intellectual need to exploring other options.²⁰² However, Atheism may or may be intellectually grounded, and can be based upon socio-cultural or authoritative influences rather than personal investigation.²⁰³ On interview Scott stated, ‘From the earliest stage I just didn’t believe in God. To me, it was a weakness in people to believe in some kind of God or something like that, but I never really put much thought into it.’ Brad expressed, ‘As an Atheist, I thought that my worldview was robust and explained the world around me out of all of the other worldviews that I knew of. And, I would say I put my worldview to the test earlier, but in hindsight I actually hadn’t.’

²⁰² SoGoSurvey: As afore-reported in Chapter 4 The Atheist Stage, over half of the participants in this study (28/50; 56.0%) (Q24) held a superior view of naturalistic Atheism over any other ideology; approximately four of ten (21/50; 42.0%) (Q15) held Atheism as intellectually satisfying, that it provided substantive, rational answers to issues of life and reality; nearly two-thirds (37/50; 74.0%) (Q31) were ‘highly certain’ of the truth of Atheism; (11/41; 22.0%) (Q31) were moderate-highly certain. Only one-third (15/50; 29.51%) (Q12) expressed a tentative nature to their Atheistic belief, that they ‘doubted it at times’.

²⁰³ On interviews, participants reflected on personal, socio-cultural influences regarding presumed disbelief in God. Ed stated, ‘I think it [Atheistic belief] was all one big smorgasbord, or salad mixed together, and *I didn’t obviously have any serious reflection to lead to these things. They were snap judgments*, but boy was I sure and cocky about it.... I certainly had little in the way of seriously thought about, reflected positions.’

Jason stated, ‘I don’t know that I thought that much about it. And it really wasn’t until 16 or 17 that I started hanging out, getting out of the house and developing larger communities of friends that I really started thinking more about God. So it was more of the idea of God was sort of an afterthought more than anything. It was like, “Well, God may or may not be there” but I don’t remember dedicating any time beyond that sort of experimentation to thinking about God whatsoever...So, *I had a lot vague notions and feelings and general beliefs but they weren’t really founded*...And so I had these vague ideas, again, for me it wasn’t as if I had this really deep understanding of scientific principles to say, “Well, this is why we don’t believe in God.” It was just sort of a generalized, “Well, we know about evolution and we know about the formation of the universe’ and all of these types of things. ‘So, why do we need to even talk about God for?’”

At the Catalyst Stage, 35-43% of subjects began to experience dissatisfaction with the Atheistic worldview and its perceived intellectual impotence to sufficiently address facts about reality. Cognitive dissonance or curiosity caused them to seek resolution outside of naturalistic Atheism. Three-quarters of study participants (37/50; 74.0%) (Q27n)²⁰⁴ reported their ‘tendency to question’ led them towards Christianity.²⁰⁵ Many were led towards investigating Christianity due to their desire to resolve lingering doubts (22/50; 44.0%) (Q27c), unanswered questions (19/50; 38.0%) (Q27d) or resolve growing cognitive tension(s). Overall, approximately one-third (18/50; 36.0%) (Q18)²⁰⁶ initiated an intellectual quest to in order to resolve a cognitive tension produced by naturalism’s perceived impotence to explain physical nature and/or human nature. After Aaron’s grandparents suddenly converted to Christianity, he began to search world religions to assess their explanatory power for basic truths. He stated,

You start to think about purpose and meaning, relationship, love, and morality and these sorts of things. The way I thought of it was these things – here’s a list of ten things I sort of accept as brute facts, as true. How does each worldview understand, appreciate, and justify those things? And when I looked at Atheism on these things, they wouldn’t do as well as I thought they would. It didn’t do as good as Christianity...

And, so while looking at Atheism, looking at these things, it left me unsatisfied both emotionally and intellectually. So, if I was to be honest about those things while I was looking at them, then that kind of investigation was a reason for me to be just generally skeptical of the kind of naturalistic, materialistic, Atheistic view of the world... It was in the end quite unsatisfying to live with.

The data confirmed unanswered scientific or philosophical questions within the Atheistic worldview prompted many towards searching for satisfying solutions.²⁰⁷ When the

²⁰⁴ SoGoSurvey: By comparison, one-half of the respondents reported doubts/uncertainties (26/50; 52.0%) (Q27c) or unanswered questions (27/50; 54.0%) (Q27d) initially led them towards Atheism. One-quarter (24/50; 47.05%) (Q27n) of this group’s ‘tendency to question’ led them towards Atheism.

²⁰⁵ This majority’s tendency to question potentially encompasses both substantive and functional sources of inquiry; thus, resolving the discrepancy between 75% questioning, and 35-43% directed intellectual questioning (subsequent reported data).

²⁰⁶ Ashley began an intellectual search beyond naturalism when ‘someone started debating with me and poking holes in my arguments’. Michelle sensed a cognitive dissonance between ‘my aesthetic appreciation of Christian literature and my dismissal of their worldview’ and began to consider Christianity more seriously.

²⁰⁷ On interview, Jason reported after his wife began attending church, it caused him to reconsider his latent but resurfaced doubts. He stated, ‘So as I was working at this company and my wife had started back to church with our kids, it caused a lot of tension. And I started having this notion that maybe, just maybe this whole concept of the universe coming into

prominent intellectual Atheist community did not appear to be rising to the challenge of profound Christian thinkers, this spurred some respondents towards further study.²⁰⁸ Interaction with an intelligent, informed Christians (breaking the stereotype of Christians as uneducated, ignorant, superstitious) also spurred investigation,²⁰⁹ particularly when the Christian was willing to interact and/or was informed in the sciences²¹⁰ due to the strong perception of the irreconcilability of science with religious belief.²¹¹ Others began an intellectual search due to unexpected exposure to credible authors/writers offering Substance Intellectual defense of the Christian worldview;²¹² or, Christian authors who seemed to possess a richness and dimensional depth, meaning, truth imagination and beauty that secular authors did not offer.²¹³

existence out of nothing really doesn't make a whole lot of sense. I mean, how do you get something from nothing? It's typically untenable.'

²⁰⁸On interview, Kyle reported disappointment in the response of the New Atheists, particularly Richard Dawkins, to presenting intellectual Christian challenges and challengers. He reflected, 'I said, 'What do you have to say in return?' One of the things that was twisting me around was actually how little they had to say in return. And specifically, it has become rather infamous, Dawkins unwillingness to debate William Lane Craig...I really was feeling disappointed with the New Atheists because I was making life decisions based on some other things that Dawkins would say. I was kind of like, 'This all started by me trusting you Professor Dawkins when you said, 'Go for the evidence' and now I find that you are running away from it. Can you explain yourself please?'...Come on, defend this message of Atheism that I would still quite like to be true!'...But then again, when you've learned these things about how an argument works, how to actually study evidence, and finding this whole field of philosophy in academic study fascinating, you can't ignore that. If there is a certain criterion and a type of integrity that is needed in order to put your argument across then you can't go back on that. You want the Atheist to rise to the standard that the Christians are setting, and they weren't.'

²⁰⁹Respondents were repeatedly intellectually challenged after encountering intelligent Christians. On interview, Justin stated, 'My grandfather is actually a very, very bright individual. He's gone to the most prestigious school in France, he used to work in his life throughout in the most advanced field of energy and science, he speaks fluently ten languages, he is now turning 100 years old next year and he can still recite the poetry he learned when he was in grade school. He's literally a genius. And, yet he is a practicing Catholic. But I was under the impression that this kind of expression [religious belief] was not really intellectually criticized even by the same person who had critical powers to investigate it. So, there was this distinction in my mind, and here was this Protestant pastor who clearly, actually believed these things. He was a pastor so clearly his livelihood depended upon this and he was intellectual, so that challenged me.'

²¹⁰ On interview: Hostile towards Christianity, William was astonished to meet a scientifically-informed Christian. He recalled on interview, 'After the initial pleasantries, after about five minutes I asked him, 'I know you are a Christian. How can that be? *How can you be a Christian and a science teacher?*' And this may have been intimidating for him as well because he was a brand-new teacher, and here I am with a few years of experience, and he doesn't know me either. *But this was a transformative conversation. This was the change. This was the first time that I had met a Christian who was intelligent or seemingly intelligent who could answer some of the questions that I had.*' Italics, principal investigator.

²¹¹ Prior to conversion, fifty-one percent (26/50; 52.0%) (Q13) of Atheists surveyed in this study affirmed their perception of an apparent irreconcilability of religion and the hard sciences.

²¹²On interview: After being given a Christian apologetics book, Tyler became challenged and began an active investigative pursuit (reading 41 substantive books prior to conversion). He stated, 'I looked at Lee Strobel's credentials and the professors' credentials and these are some pretty eminent professors at some pretty prestigious schools. So, I thought, I can take what these guys say seriously. You have an Atheist who goes and asks these questions of these guys who know the material. So, I read the book and it challenged everything that I could think of. It was very frustrating because a lot of the stuff that was in there I had never been told before.'

²¹³On interview: Michelle perceived a palpable difference between secular and Christian authors that spurred a quest, stating, 'And that was the point where I really started thinking, 'Gosh, these guys aren't so stupid. Hopkins and Dunn and Elliot and the Anglo-Saxon poets. They're all Christians and yet they write this beautiful, intelligent...No one could call Hopkins and Dunn stupid or unintelligent. I would be the uneducated one to make that assertion. So, it was at that point and having an aesthetic and emotional response to the poetry, being moved by it in opposition to what I had believed to be

Exposure to informed Christians, even without interpersonal engagement, began to disarm preconceived negative caricatures of Christians and allowed for openness towards serious consideration of Christianity.²¹⁴ Still others struggled with possessing a strong sensibility of moral duties and obligations but simultaneously unable to ground them without the reality of a transcendent moral standard given by a transcendent moral law giver. Cognitive dissonance regarding moral reality prompted some respondents towards questing, particularly for those who hold to a high personal standard of ethics and morality. Christopher described dissonance between his personal experience, morality, and the naturalistic worldview, reporting doubts as prompting him towards openness:

I was cautious about that because there were a lot of tensions for me. For example, with regard to the moral aspect, I totally understood that Atheism had to entail moral relativism but that was always the tension because I believed strongly that moral relativism didn't make sense. It didn't really cohere with what I knew about the world. So, I knew that one entailed the other, and I just held out hope that maybe there was some kind of answer that I wasn't getting.

But I wasn't getting good questions from either Christians or Atheists. So, I suppressed it a bit, but I stood in the background and said, 'Hey, this is a question I would really like an answer to.' So, I guess that was one aspect of looking at the Atheistic framework and thinking 'Where does this logically lead me and how can I reconcile that with the rest of my worldview?' I guess I was prepared to accept it, but I just really didn't feel...I felt there were two things in conflict...It was a lingering doubt for me. I was willing to put up with it if that was the case. If it turned out that the world was Dawkins' blind pitiless indifference, then so be it, but I wouldn't say necessarily that I embraced that. It clashed with my intuitions about the world. So, that was always a source of cognitive dissonance for me.

true, I kind of finally said, 'Okay, this is maybe more complicated. There's maybe something more here than I was willing to give credit for. Let me at least ask the questions to understand better how these people believe what they believe. Because it is obviously, it can't be as superficial and stupid as what I think they believe because that can't account for the text that I have in front of me.'... I finally said, 'I'm just missing something.' And it is at that point that I began to ask questions and the answers made sense and it kind of unfolds quickly from there.



²¹⁴On interview, Christopher reflected, 'We would watch a bunch of debates with William Lane Craig and that kind of thing. Pretty quickly into watching those, it became super obvious to me that Dr. Craig, especially, was winning every debate he was in. So, that didn't necessarily make me think that his position was right, but it was enough to make me think that Christianity wasn't stupid. I really thought this [Christianity] was just an inane position and so seeing Dr. Craig just destroy everyone in debate went pretty far in just removing the obstacle in thinking that Christianity was just stupid.'

He continued, 'And so at that point, Christianity became at least an intellectually viable option, but it was still not attractive to me for other reasons, particularly its moral teachings or whatever. *So, it wasn't attractive to me at that point but at least it was intellectually viable. I saw you could be an intelligent, thoughtful person and have a faith that was rational and that there were good arguments from history and from philosophy that at least existed.*'

Alternatively, one-third of respondents (18/50; 36.0%) (Q18) initiated a Substance Intellectual search in order to disprove²¹⁵ or discredit Christianity²¹⁶ and the Bible.²¹⁷ However, those who began searching to disprove Christianity were often startled by the substantive profundity of thought and evidence that supported it.

At the Catalyst Stage, survey results (Q18) confirmed Substance Intellectual (SI) catalysts as means through which approximately one-third (36.0%) of respondents became exposed to and engaged with Christian worldview beliefs and grounding in order to resolve intellectual tensions, answer lingering questions/doubts, or disprove/discredit Christianity:

Table 17. Q18 Substance Intellectual (SI) Catalyst Stage

Q18. As an Atheist, I began asking questions about Christianity in order to: (please select all that apply)			
Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
Substance Intellectual (SI)			
resolve growing tensions between my worldview and my intellectual understanding of the world.	18	36.0%	
disprove and/or discredit Christianity	18	36.0%	

²¹⁵ On interview: Before he dismissed the Christian worldview altogether, Kyle sought its disproof, stating, ‘One of the odd reasons that I think why I ended up exploring the apologetics so much and reading so much is because *I wanted to make sure that it wasn’t true* because I had heard people say, ‘Well, actually that there is a good amount of historical evidence for this,’ that sort of thing which is odd, really. I’m not sure why I went to that. I think that was part of it.’

Some participants sought to dismiss the Bible and Jesus through reading it. On interview, Ed recalled, ‘And I remember specifically *I needed to read about Jesus, so I could tell people that Jesus was baloney*. So, I couldn’t just say, ‘I hated Christianity.’ I needed to be able to say, ‘I read it myself.’ So, I asked this Buddhist guy, it shows how ignorant I was, I asked, ‘How can I read about Jesus?’ Thank God he did not tell me to go read some non-biblical junk. He said, ‘You have to read the New Testament.’’

Sean was challenged to read what he was dismissing without investigation (the Bible). On interview he recalled, ‘He was like, ‘You go read about religion and then you come back and talk to me. Go read about it, think about it and then talk.’ And I was like, ‘Okay, I will do that.’ I went home, and I thought, ‘I am going to get this guy.’ I had this Bible lying around that someone bought me years ago.’ This investigation was the impetus that led him to believe in the reliability of the biblical text and the truth of Christianity.



²¹⁶ Participants reported the desire to investigate the credibility of and/or falsify religious worldviews, or to ‘set a Christian straight.’ On interview, Amanda stated, ‘*I met a Christian who challenged my Atheistic beliefs, and I wanted to argue with him and prove him wrong.*’

²¹⁷ On interview: Encountering the Bible, Anthony reported, ‘I started to read scripture. Originally, I was just like, you know, If I have objections to this, I should at least read it and started to and found the reports in the New Testament really, they seemed to be fairly honest reports. I mean you know, just reading them without any scholarly training and how you would read those books without any kind of critical issues, just like reading it plainly I guess *had the ‘ring of truth’* to it. It didn’t seem like people were telling things in a way that suggested that they were lying or had ulterior motives. They seemed honest and sincere and the text had a groundedness to them.

And Jesus was pretty fascinating. He was saying things that were really interesting and he was an interesting figure and really compelling. *I was fascinated by it. I couldn’t read it enough. I read the New Testament in I think two weeks.* And then I read, I was on a holiday in Spain with my family and I just spent the whole time on the beach just reading Scripture. I read through a lot of the Old Testament books as well. I remember reading Genesis, Exodus and Job. I was just really literally hungry for it, utterly fascinated, I guess. I was intrigued by their lives. Certain of my objections seemed like they weren’t as severe as I thought they were and the actual content of Christianity, once I looked into it, when I read the Bible, it seemed really compelling.’

When asked as to the most effective means by which each respondent was attracted to or convinced of Christianity (Q23), Substance Intellectual (SI) played a role:

Table 18. Q23 Substance Intellectual (SI) Catalyst Stage

Q23. As an Atheist, the most effective means by which I was attracted to and/or convinced of the Christian faith was through: (please select all that apply)			
Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
Substance Intellectual (SI)			
investigating the evidences for Christianity	25	50.0%	
observing the rationale of knowledgeable Christians regarding their beliefs	15	30.0%	
Other (please specify)	5		

One-half (25/50; 50.0%) (Q23) actively investigated the evidence for Christianity and approximately one-third (15/50; 30.0%) observed the rationale of Christianity through knowledgeable Christians. Moreover, three-fourths of the respondents (39/50; 78.0%) (Q27f), a dominant majority, confirmed the essential position of intellectual discussion, issues of evidence and objective truth in the process of ideological paradigm shifting.²¹⁸

Substance of belief, that there is ‘real truth’ is important for the rational, pragmatic individual. Skeptical of competing narratives, the scientifically-minded, logical, educated Atheistic thinker stereotypically requires sufficient grounding to adequately counter their dominant Atheistic narrative. Opposing truth claims warranted sufficient foundational support and defensible rational substantiation prior to their acceptance. Religious belief, particularly Christianity, must be shown as more than merely social construct and/or psychological projection. Michelle affirmed, ‘Belief (religious or otherwise) is more than rational but it is not less than rational.’ This research confirmed Substance Intellectual (SI) aspects as positively contributing towards conversion at the Catalyst Stage.

7.3.1.2. Nature and Means of SI Questing, Catalyst Stage

Of those respondents who actively sought to ascertain the truth of Christianity, they searched through reading the Bible, apologetic literature, discussions with religious authorities, family or friends, or through technological resources (such as online forums,

²¹⁸ Noteworthy is the survey finding that only a minority found intellectual discussion, issues of evidence and objective truth as influential towards Atheistic belief (10/50; 19.60%) (Q27f).

debates, and podcasts). Most began looking at Christianity through reading the Bible (30/50; 60.0%) (Q19). A strong negative preconception of the Bible existed among the former Atheists as ‘a mixture of myth, fabrication, ignorant commentary from Bronze Age Jews’ (Greg), ‘a tool that somebody had actually crafted in order to control the population’ (Todd), generally a non-historical, false religious book. However, once examining the Bible many found it to be historically, intellectually and morally forceful, with ‘a ring of truth’ (Anthony) and were compelled towards serious, even voracious reading.²¹⁹ In reading the bible, respondents were surprised by its historical reliability, coherence, and apparent ‘goodness.’²²⁰ Personal study diffused negative stereotypes of the bible and of Jesus, creating openness and

²¹⁹ On interview: Initially hostile to reading the Bible, Tom found a surprising insatiable appetite towards reading. He states, ‘The first week he gave me an assignment to read the first three chapters of John. I had never read the Bible and did not even want to touch it. But I had to do the assignment, so I started reading. I could not stop and read the whole book of John that week. We spent 7 weeks meeting and I loved the whole thing, but if there is no God, it's just a story and I'm not going to put my trust in a story. We stopped meeting, but I kept reading.’

On interview: Upon reading the bible, Greg was astonished at its intellectual and moral veracity, affirming its persuasive role in his conversion: ‘I remember just started reading the bible myself. I read it starting in the book of Acts because I thought I knew the Gospels. I thought I had read all that and knew that – that's all just miracles and healings and stuff so I didn't want to read that. Because, I was just like, ‘that stuff didn't happen anyway. It's not real.’...I started in Acts because it was the first book after John. So, I just started reading and I read, and I read and read. I just kept reading. I read Romans, I Corinthians. I think after Acts, I was completely amazed. That was something that really caused me to go, ‘Whoa, no one told me about this. I have never heard about these kinds of testimonies - the sermons they preached, the journeys that they made spreading the gospel.’

It was just really amazing to read it. I couldn't understand why they went to all the trouble to do that, to all die for it and commit their entire lives to it, especially the apostle Paul. He was the most interesting character for me because he was a non-believer...I didn't think that would be possible from the Bible. I didn't think you would encounter intelligent characters like Paul. You wouldn't encounter people with this kind of moral character, intellectual rigor. So, I just had to read his words. I just devoured them. I just had to read them. I read Romans and then I went on to read the rest of the New Testament and then I went back to read the gospels. It was just amazing. *That was, for me I think that was one of the hugest things was just reading the Bible was one of the biggest things for me becoming a Christian...I probably read the whole thing in three or four months.*

²²⁰ On interview: William's impression of the Bible and Christianity (as well as his attitude) changed as he read it, stating: ‘But over time I found that as I was reading through Acts and as I moved on to the letters of Paul, I was learning so much. I could see that it is really nice. That Christianity is really nice. It is really good in its purest form. *There was still stuff I didn't believe, and I found hard to accept, but the message itself as I came to understand it was just not something that I could hate anymore.*’

On interview: Nicholas found a surprisingly distinct historical nature to the Bible, not mere mythology, deepening the seriousness of his search. He described his journey: ‘I actually picked up a Bible and started reading Matthew. And from there, I started putting everything together. I actually started reading the Bible for the first time, critically rather than just, ‘Oh, this is silly. Of course, they are talking about this or they are talking about that.’ I actually started looking at the Bible very critically and looking at as to how in NT Wright presented it, that *it is an actual historical document from the people who were there. That's when it kind of hit me, ‘Well, holy crap.’ I was like, ‘Okay, this is starting to get serious now because it is more than just someone claimed of being raised from the dead. It is something that happened in history.*’

encouraging further investigation.²²¹ Others were moved towards ‘testing out’ Christianity²²² or even towards conversion.²²³

In examining the credibility of the Christian worldview, forty percent (21/50; 42.0%) (Q19) read ‘other religious literature or books’ (beyond religious texts) including exploration of world religions or books providing an *apologia*²²⁴, an intellectual defense of the theistic worldview. Christian apologetics played an important role for many former Atheists, particularly for those who lacked prior awareness of significant Christian authors and speakers in philosophy, history, theology, and science. Once exposed to the substantial nature of such resources, many were admittedly stunned. One young man, a self-described nihilist well-informed of French existentialism by age 14, expressed his astonishment as he became aware of the profundity of historical and contemporary Christian thought and expression. Jeremy stated,

I remember that was the first time I thought, wait a minute. There was the whole world, a whole universe of Christian thinking below the surface here that I had absolutely no idea about. That was when I discovered how ignorant my concepts of it were. That's when I started to dive deep into, you know,

²²¹ On interview: Regarding the compelling nature of Jesus, Greg reflected: ‘It was his [Jesus’] own self-understanding of who he was. He never flinched from asserting his authority as the Son of God. The titles he gave himself, the things he said to the religious elite, he didn’t back down from his claims. He claimed to be the Son of God. He seemed, at least according to the eyewitnesses, he seemed to have worked miracles. And it was this combination of his compassion for the weak and his bravery, his courage in the face of evil. He did not back down from the Pharisees, from Pilate. He spoke the truth in a way that it just, you don’t see people do this. Nobody talks like Jesus does. He was so compelling, and I found I just had to, the Gospel of John was amazing for me because there are so many of his sermons to the apostles. There are long chapters of him talking and talking. The way he describes his relationship with the Father was just amazing, this intimate relationship between them of love and oneness. *I just found him amazing. I never, never experienced that or heard of it that I could recall when I went to church. Either it wasn’t being preached or I was willfully ignorant of it, but it was all brand-new and I was amazed by it, by his preaching, by his parables, by his sermons. And it was profoundly convicting on the one hand, but it made me want to understand who he was, and can he be trusted, is this real? Those were the huge questions to me.*’

²²² On interview: After extensive reading of the Bible, Jeremy found Christianity worth practical exploration. He recalled, ‘At that point, I was reading an awful lot of the Bible and had shifted very much into well, *‘I want to take this for a test drive’ in a sense. I describe this experience as trying on other worldviews, sorting through a box of wires. And when I finally got down to what the meat of Christianity was, it with the only thing that kind of shocked back, kind of grabbing a live wire. And what that looked like for me is kind of hard to put into words.*’

²²³ On interview: Matthew said, ‘I just kept reading. I would come home from school and do my homework and if I wasn’t hanging out with my friends and getting into trouble, I would pick up the bible. I kept wanting to give the New Testament a shot even though I had trouble understanding it. I read I John and at this point I was more open than at any point. And, it was in I John where he talked about if you love the world you can’t say that you love God. And, everything in the world is passing away, the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, the pride of life, but the one who does the will of God lives forever. And, at that point, the Holy Spirit just really convicted me. I could really sense that He was present and, in the room, and real. And so, it was kind of like a religious experience type of thing and at that point, the whole thing that I had been thinking about all the time – there is no meaning to life, and it is all transitory and passes away and everything, and then there’s this. And, I don’t want to say physically sense, but really sense a presence here. So, at that point I repented and got on my knees and I don’t even remember what I said, but at that point I was different. I was changed. I believe that is when I was born again.’

²²⁴ *apologia* – a Latin term meaning ‘A formal written defense of one's opinions or conduct.’ *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*; <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/apologia>.

Lee Strobel led very quickly to William Lane Craig, Alvin Plantinga, actually sitting down to read Augustine and just thinking, 'I am such a fool for thinking, like a punk attitude at 15 and 16 years old because I am angry, I can throw away all of this ton of literature that people have been thinking about these profoundly important questions, like 'Who am I?' Like, I am arrogant, but I am not that arrogant.

*And so, there was a shift subtly there from 'I am going to disprove Christianity' to saying, 'I want to know if it is actually true.' And so, that was of fundamental importance, you get this commitment to truth. I want to know what reality actually is. Really that process it took almost 18 months or so of painstaking research...just really wrestling through a lot of intensive apologetics stuff.*²²⁵

In addition to researching Christianity through the Biblical text and apologetics resources, others sought discussion with a religious authority or expert (11/50; 22.0%) (Q19), interacted with Christian family members/friends (13/50, 26.0%) (Q19) or acquaintances (16/50, 32.0%) (Q19). Although exposure to informed, articulate Christians prompted reconsideration for some, the overall quality of many Christian interactions left a perception of ineptness. Only one-fourth of Atheists (12/50; 24.0%) (Q20) found Christians to be 'informed regarding the content of Christian beliefs and worldview'. Only a small minority (7/50; 14.0%) (Q20) saw Christians as 'able to substantively respond' to their questions. Approximately half of these discussions were met with an impression of the Christian's *inability* to adequately respond (28/50; 56.0%) (Q20).²²⁶ On report, the Christians lacked knowledge and understanding of scientific evidence (26/50; 52.0%) (Q20),²²⁷ were uninformed regarding content of Christian beliefs and worldview (20/50; 40.0%) (Q20), and were unable or unaware of the need to ask good questions (24/50; 48.0%) (Q20).

²²⁵ On interview, Jeremy continued, 'I was certainly on the bread crumb trail. I had no idea where it was leading me. I was so stuck in these specific issues, walking through my progression of how I got from existential nihilism to Christian theism. It is not as long a journey as some people think but there were big issues each time.' He moved through issues of God's existence, aesthetics, beauty, truth, the person and nature of Jesus, and reading scripture, among others. After extensive study, he was eventually converted through a self-described spiritual experience.

²²⁶ SoGoSurvey (Q20): Respondents perceived a general ignorance of Christians regarding their own beliefs. James stated, 'I was amazed to find them to be quite pleasant people albeit very ignorant of facts.' Justin stated, 'I didn't know any real Christian and those who still professed Christ didn't seem to be very confident, and I didn't press them because embarrassing them wouldn't have brought about much of value.'

²²⁷ SoGoSurvey (Q20): Amanda stated, 'Most evangelical Christians I have known in the past seemed to lack significant knowledge of science and tended to be defensive when questioned.'

Beyond content, the pragmatics of Christian engagement was also perceived to be lacking in the Atheists' perspective. One-fourth of respondents negatively characterized Christians as 'closed to and/or avoiding interactive dialogue' (14/50; 28.0%) (Q20), 'defensive' (13/50; 26.0%) (Q20), or 'more prone to talk than listen' (13/50; 26.0%) (Q20). Conversely, only a minority of respondents positively observed Christians to be 'open to and/or initiating substantive content' (12/50; 24.0%) (Q20), 'good, discerning, interested listeners' (12/50; 24.0%) (Q20), 'winsome and confident' (8/50; 16.0%) (Q20), and 'able to ask good questions' (6/50; 12.0%) (Q20). Pre-conversion, respondents engaged with a variety of Christians over time, both uninformed and informed and/or who challenged their negative preconceptions.²²⁸

However, many had little to no direct personal exposure to Christians or did not directly seek interaction with Christians, so direct engagement was significantly limited in their quest and influenced their responses in the survey.²²⁹ Technology provided a practical resource for investigating Christianity, particularly for those who had minimal personal exposure to Christians. Ten to twenty percent of respondents reported active searching through internet blogs (11/50; 22.0%) (Q19), watching internet debates (8/50; 16.0%) (Q19), listening to Christian podcasts²³⁰ (6/50; 12.0%) (Q19). Gaining information via technology influenced the respondents both towards Atheism (16/50; 32.0%) (Q27e) and towards Christian belief (20/50; 40.0%) (Q27e). One-half (26/50; 52.0%) (Q28e) reported an 'independent choice to believe in Christianity apart from the influence of others'. Four out of every ten respondents (21/50; 41.17%) (Q28i) reported to 'believe before belonging' to any

²²⁸ SoGoSurvey (Q20): George reported, 'The Christians I interacted with ranged widely in their confidence, knowledge, etc. but since there was a good number of them, a lot of content got through to me over time.' Anthony stated, 'I met many Christians who challenged my stereotypes: intelligent, compassionate, who walked their talk, lived the gospel.'

²²⁹ SoGoSurvey (Q20): Dennis stated, 'I had minimal interaction with Christians prior to conversion.' Greg acknowledged the independence of his search, asserting, 'I did not actively seek input from Christians at that time. *My investigations were conducted alone.*'

²³⁰ On interview: Through a process of independent listening, learning and contemplating, Ryan learned of foundation (or lack thereof) of his own Atheistic worldview and the presence of more substance to the Christian worldview than he had initially granted. He stated, 'I would say probably 80 or 90 percent of my contemplation was through reading or listening to something like one directional audio versus actually having conversations with people. That kind of came later.'

religious group or joining in any religious activities. This trend towards independent questing and belief countered presumptions in the sociological theories and models of conversion which presume and/or require strong sociological influence as necessary.

7.3.1.3. Substance Intellectual (SI), Conversion Stage













When respondents were asked as to their primary reasons for conversion, Substance Intellectual played a role for one-third to two-thirds of participants. At the Conversion Stage, the most prominently reported Substance reasons were the life and claims of Jesus Christ (two-thirds), the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the truth of the Bible and the rationality of Christian belief (one-half). For comparison, subjects were also questioned (Q21) as to the most compelling rational evidence for the existence of God within their former Atheistic perspective.²³¹ Congruent with these findings, the most compelling rational evidence was the ‘historical person and resurrection of Jesus’ according to the over half of the former Atheists surveyed in this research (28/50; 56.0%) (Q21).²³² This interesting finding coheres with the essential nature and reality of Jesus’ resurrection as the critical keystone upon which remaining Christian beliefs stand or fall.²³³ In sum, results from Q29 reflect the positive presence and influential role Substance Intellectual played at the Conversion Stage:

²³¹ SoGoSurvey (Q21): Other compelling rational evidence for God at the Atheist Stage: The cosmological²³¹ (17/50; 34.0%) (Q21) and moral arguments²³¹ (13/50; 26.0%) (Q21) served as next most compelling rational evidences for theism, followed by the presence of truth, beauty, and goodness (11/50; 22.0%) (Q21). A minority deemed other arguments persuasive,²³¹ including grounds for rationality (7/50; 13.73%) (Q21), textual reliability of the Bible (7/50; 13.73%) (Q21), teleological argument (6/50; 12.0%) (Q21) and the comprehensive Christian worldview rationality, coherence and livability (4/50; 8.0%) (Q21).

²³² In examining the evidence for the resurrection, Nicholas found himself convinced of its historical truth. On interview, he stated, ‘But that is what caused me to go to my uncle who has a PhD in theology from Oxford University. I basically asked him, I’ve got to know actual, historical, objective evidence for Christianity. And that is when he sent me a book about Jesus’s resurrection. That’s where I was convinced after reading that book...After getting part way through and reading about the historical evidence behind it about the resurrection, the culture Jesus grew up in, and how NT Wright lays down the argument that is basically indisputable. I mean, it is something I can’t really explain, but all of a sudden, I had an immediate mind switch. I thought “Wow, I believe in this stuff.” That is kind of where it happened.’

²³³ The apostle Paul addresses the fundamental import and truth of Christ’s resurrection as foundational to the Christian worldview; otherwise, all Christian belief is vanity and all who believe in it as to be ‘pitied more than all men’. I Corinthians 15:12-19.

Table 19. Q29 Substance Intellectual (SI), Conversion Stage

Q29. My primary reason(s) for changing towards belief in God and conversion to Christianity was/were: (please select all that apply)			
Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
Substance Intellectual (SI)			
the life and claims of Jesus Christ	33	66.0%	
evidence for the resurrection of Jesus	26	52.0%	
truth of the Bible	24	48.0%	
rationality of Christian belief	23	46.0%	
objective evidence for God, philosophical	21	42.0%	
positive intellectual consequences, deepened rational understanding of God, the world, and myself	20	40.0%	
reconcilability between science and religion	18	36.0%	
objective evidence for God, historical	18	36.0%	
objective moral grounding	17	34.0%	
objective evidence for God, scientific	15	30.0%	
exposure to Christian belief, generally	13	26.0%	
Other (please specify)	2	4.0%	

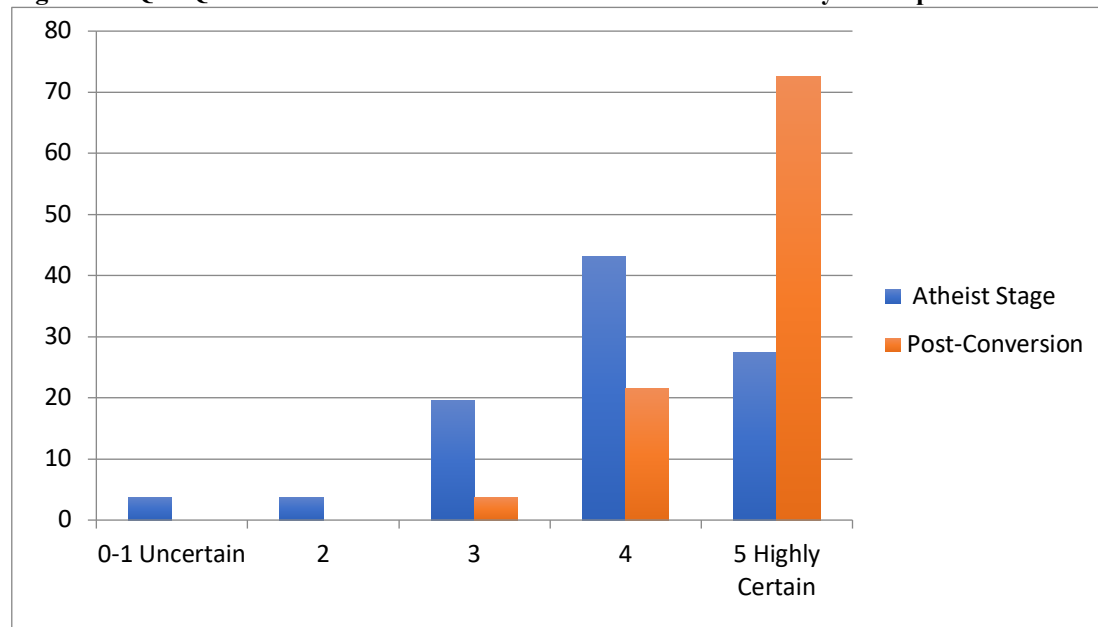
7.3.1.4. Substance Intellectual (SI) Summary

Perceived difficulties within the naturalistic Atheism prompted 35-43% of Atheists towards searching for a worldview with greater explanatory power. For others, the drive towards investigating the bible or the Christian worldview was fueled to dismiss rather than embrace it. Still others began seriously considering the tenets of Christianity after first becoming open because of functional influences. Regardless of the motivation, Substance Intellectual influence is reported by converts in this study to be a critical component in the religious conversion process (if not prior to or prompting conversion, then following the conversion itself). At the Catalyst Stage, Substance Intellectual (SI) variables precipitated initial stage of the conversion process for approximately one-third (36.0%) (Q18) of respondents, increasing to two-thirds (68.0%) (Q29) at the Conversion Stage. As a group of individuals, highly educated with a heightened sense of rational superiority over ‘superstitious, non-scientific, religious believers,’ profession of belief in religious claims entailed rational, evidential grounding.

On the survey, subjects were asked ‘how convinced’ they were in their pre- and post-conversion perspectives. Pre-conversion, any purported evidence for God was often summarily dismissed without serious consideration due to the perceived impotence of

religious belief, strong naturalistic presuppositions, lack of desire, and/or loss of plausibility in the socio-culturally and intellectually valid marketplace of ideas. As Atheists, confidence in their naturalistic worldview was moderately high.²³⁴

Figure 19. Q16/Q31 Convinced of the Truth of Atheism and Christianity – Comparison











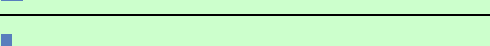


Post-conversion, confidence in the truth of God’s existence and the Christian worldview was markedly higher than pre-conversion confidence in the truth of the Atheistic worldview.²³⁵

Further, respondents expressed a high level of confidence in the perceived ‘knowability’ of objective truths about the existence of God (44/50; 88.0%) (Q30). Only fifteen percent (8/50; 16.0%) (Q30) expressed a tentative nature to their post-conversion belief in God, four percent (2/50; 4.0%) due to inherent nature of human finitude and knowledge. Blind faith did not ground Christianity, according to almost all subjects (49/50; 98.0%) (Q30), strongly countering the stereotypical Atheistic critique of religious faith as essentially ungrounded. Rather, the truths of Christianity were deemed to be ‘knowable, objective, and rational’.

²³⁴ SoGoSurvey (Q16): Convinced of the truth of Atheism at Atheist Stage: ‘Uncertain’ rating 0-1 (1/50; 2.0%; rating 2 (2/50; 4.0%); rating 3 (10/50; 20.0%); rating 4 (22/50; 44.0%); and, ‘Highly certain’ (14/50; 28.0%).

²³⁵ SoGoSurvey (Q31): Convinced of the truth of Christianity at the time of survey: ‘Uncertain’ rating 0-1 (0/50; 0.00%; rating 2 (0/50; 0.0%); rating 3 (2/50; 4.0%); rating 4 (11/50; 22.0%); and, ‘Highly certain’ (37/50; 74.0%).

Table 20. Q30 Substance Intellectual Knowledge of God, Post-Conversion

Q30. As a Christian, I believe that knowledge and truth regarding the existence of God is: (please select all that apply)			
Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
knowable, objective and rational; I am confident that God exists	44	88.0%	
known through divine revelation ²³⁶	43	86.0%	
compatible with scientific knowledge	42	84.0%	
known through experience ²³⁷	40	80.0%	
known through logical reasoning	37	74.0%	
known through evidence / historical methodology	36	72.0%	
questionable/tentative; I doubt my Christian belief at times.	8	16.0%	
not confident due to human limitation of knowledge	2	4.0%	
essentially unknowable, but believed by blind faith	1	2.0%	
subjective and relative to particular culture and language	0	0%	
Other (please specify)	8	16.0%	
Total Responses	267		

According to many participants, radically altering a belief system required a strong substantive case due to the implications and demands of such change. However, despite a change of intellectual beliefs in the truths of God and Christianity, belief often times was insufficient to facilitate conversion. Interestingly, some respondents candidly reported the ineffectual nature of rational arguments in their conversion process. Eight participants (8/50; 16.0%) (Q21) affirmed rational arguments as not convincing.²³⁸ For others, although intellectual arguments for the Christian worldview were determined as rationally convincing, resistance to conversion remained present. The demanding nature of religious conversion to Christianity requires more than mere cognitive belief in the propositional truths grounding

²³⁶ 'Divine revelation' included general revelation of natural law (i.e., being, design, rationality/order of the universe, seeming inherent sense of moral duties and obligations), special revelation (i.e., the person of Jesus Christ, Biblical text, as well as perceived interaction with spiritual entities).

²³⁷ Experience, although functional in nature, supports objective claims about reality, that experience coheres with the Christian narrative, beliefs, and understanding about physical nature and human nature.

²³⁸ SoGoSurvey (Q21): Regarding the impotence of rational arguments, Dennis stated, 'As an apathetic Atheist, I spent very little effort considering intellectual arguments for theism.' Anthony said, 'As an Atheist I was ignorant of most of these arguments – I simply had never heard of most of them. I thought science had explained the origin of life and the universe.'

Christianity. Conversion also entails placing personal fiduciary trust in the person of Christ for salvation as well as the subsequent surrender of all areas of life to God. Justin described:

For an Atheist to be very convinced of his Atheism who can radically change his mind is going to entail that he is absolutely convinced this is the case because he is not going to convert unless he is really sure. And so that's very strong belief in Christianity as a consequence.

If you really believe it is true it is going to change everything. And prior to my conversion, that condition was a problem. To me, it was clear that if Christianity is true, my life could never be the same. Now, that was a problem because *it was a very costly decision.* But once I crossed on the other side of the barrier, then I just have to follow it through. If it is, in fact, real; therefore, it changes everything. *My life has been completely flipped upside down - every single area of my worldview.* But now that it is the case, I can only live one hundred percent on those matters.

Due to the comprehensive shifting that religious conversion requires, the conversion process often occurs in stages. A person comes to not only to acknowledge the truth as aligning with the reality of God and the human condition but also must willingly accept these truths and 'the Christian gospel' as applied to his or her own life.²³⁹ Some respondents reported a gradual progression from unbelief to belief, moving from Atheism towards agnosticism²⁴⁰ or openness to supernatural reality, and finally towards Christian belief. Slightly more than one-half (27/50; 54.0%) (Q27i) reported a 'gradual' movement towards conversion; and, slightly less than one-half (22/50; 44.0%) (Q27h) declared a 'sudden'

²³⁹ On interview: Kyle described the process from being intellectually convinced that Christianity was true to finally becoming willing to 'give his life to Jesus.' He stated, 'Overall, from the beginning of looking into this stuff to becoming a Christian that was about four years, maybe five. I think you could say there was at least a year where from a strictly academic point of view I was thinking this stuff looks like it's true, but I still held out against it for a while because I still wanted to live in a certain way and not get on board yet. And it is very, there is still more I could find out. But then eventually you get to the point where are you have to make a decision. And in my case, it was realizing that it was a bit funny almost realizing that, "I think you believe in this stuff already, don't you? Well then get on with it! Become one if you already believe it, what are you waiting for?" There was definitely both. There was definitely an interplay between that genuine intellectual doubt and less admirable personal biases against it. I'm sure it was both of those.'

²⁴⁰ On interview: Describing a 'drifting' from agnosticism to Atheism and from Atheism towards agnosticism, Matthew recalled, 'And then over months and a couple of years back into more of an agnosticism, "maybe there is a God", that sort of thing where it doesn't make sense if the world would just come to be and there is no explanation at all. So, I thought maybe there could be a God, but if he exists, he is not really interested in us at all, that type of thing. For at least for two years, I was definitely, 'There is no God.'"

On interview: After becoming more open to Christianity based upon thoughtful investigation, Jeremy affirmed his movement from Atheism to agnosticism, 'Yes, I would certainly say that I was a hopeful agnostic still at the point. I was really curious to see, because I wanted to know the person of Jesus. So that phase, I was probably going to church regularly as a very curious agnostic for probably another six months or so.'

On interview: Still another, Jacob, described his interim agnostic state while a curious church attendee over a two-year period, stating, 'I began to see how wholesome it [Christianity] was as far as living with morals, living with a moral guide. It wasn't God, but it was a little bit closer, it was a step closer. The way I express it is...here is the fence, I was taken from the Atheist side of the fence and put on the fence.'

religious conversion.²⁴¹ Overall, these findings affirm Substance Intellectual (SI) influence as important for intellectual, educated Atheists in conversion. Whether in isolation (single issue) or in combination (multiple issues), justification of particular rational, moral, and evidential truths was necessary for the dominant majority in order to move towards conversion. If beliefs were not sufficiently grounded prior to conversion, then respondents required substantive post-conversion validation in order to sustain held beliefs. However, Substance Intellectual (SI) variables alone were insufficient for the majority of subjects in religious conversion. Only a minority (18%) reported the primary reason for religious conversion as motivated solely by substantive reasons. The dominant majority of subjects required a combination of intellectual, spiritual and functional elements for conversion.



7.3.2. Spiritual Experiential (SE) Influences

Religious experience warrants inclusion due to the prevalence of respondents who reported its presence and influence in religious conversion. Subjects reported Spiritual Experiences (SE) at the Catalyst, Conversion, and Post-Conversion Stages, causing openness and searching towards God, prompting religious conversion, or validating the reality of God following conversion. At the Atheist Stage, subjects believed only natural world existed. By exclusion, a closed, material universe disallowed any possibility of supernatural reality. When an experience occurred beyond the explanatory scope of naturalism, consideration of another aspect of reality was potentially acknowledged or dismissed.²⁴² At the Catalyst Stage, eight subjects (8/50; 16.0%) (Q18) began questing in response to a religious/mystical experience or to a spiritual dream or vision:

²⁴¹ Comparably, pre-conversion belief towards Atheism was gradual for approximately one-half of respondents (26/50; 52.0%) (Q27i); and reportedly sudden in nature for a small minority (6/50; 12.0%) (Q27h).






²⁴² On interview: Amanda recalled dismissal of a pre-conversion spiritual experience, stating, 'I did have experiences with God before becoming an Atheist that I thought were somewhat divine encounters. Part of my rejection of those was because I thought I was just deceiving myself. And it's funny because a lot of times I'll hear Christians say, 'Well, I experienced this touch of God and this and that.' But for me, without the rational grounding that there could even be a God, I could always explain those kinds of experiences away.'

Table 21. Q18 Spiritual Experiential (SE), Catalyst Stage

Q18. As an Atheist, I began asking questions about Christianity in order to: (please select all that apply)			
Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
SUBSTANCE Spiritual Experiential (SE)			
respond to a religious/mystical experience	7	14.0%	
respond to a dream or vision	1	2.0%	


At the Conversion Stage, 22-44% of respondents reported a Spiritual Experiential (SE) as influential towards their belief in God and conversion to Christianity:

Table 22. Q29 Spiritual Experiential (SE), Conversion Stage

Q29. My primary reason(s) for changing towards belief in God and conversion to Christianity was/were: (please select all that apply)			
Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
SUBSTANCE Spiritual Experiential (SE)			
a religious / mystical experience	22	44.0%	
subjective evidence for God, personal	20	40.0%	
forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God	16	32.0%	
answered prayer	11	22.0%	
Other (please specify)	6	12.0%	

Overall, more than one-third (18/50; 36.0%) reported some form of religious experience as attracting them towards or convincing them of the truth of Christianity:²⁴³

Table 23. Q23 Spiritual Experiential (SE), Catalyst and/or Conversion Stages

Q23. As an Atheist, the most effective means by which I was attracted to and/or convinced of the Christian faith was through: (please select all that apply)			
Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
SUBSTANCE Spiritual Experiential (SE)			
encountering a religious experience with God	18	36.0%	

7.3.2.1. Spiritual Experiential, external (SEe)

Participants described spiritual experiences as heightening an awareness of a realm beyond physical matter. External Spiritual Experiences (SEe) consisted of spiritual encounters whereby a person felt a palpable sense of being in the presence of an independent spiritual entity or person through a dream, vision, or experience. Some encounters reportedly occurring during the Atheist Stage (including but not limited to ‘dark’ spiritual experiences) did not seem to be prompted by openness or searching and may or may not have precipitated

²⁴³ SoGoSurvey (Q18): One respondent described a simultaneous moment of Catalyst and Conversion in response to a convincing spiritual encounter. Melissa stated, ‘I was not an Atheist for most of the religious/mystical experience. How long do you think it took Paul to change his mind after Jesus appeared to him on the road?’

an openness towards belief in God. That is, although respondents may have come to believe in the existence of dark spiritual reality, they still may not have acknowledged the possibility of God's existence.²⁴⁴

At the Catalyst Stage, spiritual experiences typically took the form of external (SEe) encounters prompting further investigation into the reality of God and the truth of Christianity²⁴⁵ or arousing an awareness of and openness towards God.²⁴⁶ For six subjects in this study (6/50; 12.0%) (Q19), openness and questing towards God took the form of a prayer. In response to prayer, some respondents encountered unexpected spiritual experiences (SEe).²⁴⁷ Providential circumstances were considered to be extraordinary

²⁴⁴On interview: John encountered 'dark' spirituality as an adolescent and young adult although remained an Atheist. He described two distinct dark experiences: 'Because for me, there was this spiritual awakening for me when I was a teenager...I had had experience with occult stuff with my friends – Wigi boards and this kind of stuff. I had seen someone actually thrown across a room and it freaked me out. I was only 13 years old...We had no idea what happened, how the person got on the floor, and I was out of that house like a bullet – never went back. And, I mean, when they talk about the hairs on the back of your head standing up, that is what it felt like, and I was so scared.'

There were subsequent occult, dark experiences because a couple of years later there was another thing in an apartment I had. There was a guy there at my apartment where I was holding a party. He was a Satanist and he started doing this kind of ceremony thing with some of these girls and this guy comes and says, 'You've got to come and see this.' He thought it was kind of cute. And then something happened. I mean literally, it was like the whole place went ice cold and again the same thing happened and we were all scared. And, we were standing there. There are these big windows in these old tenement buildings, about 8-9 feet high. It sounded like something tried to push the windows near us, like a crack sound, and we just lost it. The music went off. Everything went silent. Everybody started looking and they all started filtering out. Well, that was my apartment. I had to stay there which I did for two days and then I left it. I abandoned it. I couldn't stay there so I left. Something had come in and hadn't left...I haven't been able to figure out why I couldn't deduct if there was dark power that there was good power.'

²⁴⁵ On interview: A de-converted Christian, Melissa became an Atheist due to apparent lack of substantive intellectual answers to lingering questions. Through a profound personal spiritual experience, belief in God was restored; however, it precipitated the need for further intellectual grounding. 'I wanted it to be not just an experience because the experience was crazy. I wanted it to be something that I was intellectually grasping. So, I just started researching it...I am learning this is so that other people can learn and not have their faith crumbled the way mine was.'

On interview: Justin, a life-long Atheist resistant to Christianity, visited a church service to explore what his newfound Christian girlfriend believed. Anxious and attempting to leave after the service, he encountered the unexpected. He recalled, 'I took my bag, jumped on my feet and walked all the way back to the back of the church to escape. I literally had one out of the door, I opened the door, had one foot out of the door, and this big blast in my stomach just grabbed me by the throat and I froze. It is hard for me to say it without choking up because this is huge. I heard myself. So, I didn't associate, 'Oh this is God grabbing me by the throat,' although that might be an obviously conclusion for a Christian. At the time, my feet just froze there, and I heard myself saying, 'Look, this is ridiculous. What am I doing here? If I came, I need to know, so let's know.' So, I turned around and I walked straight to the head pastor and I introduced myself. He met me under those circumstances. And I told him, 'So, you believe in God?' And he said, 'Well yes, of course, and we can talk about it.' And so, we took some time and we went to his office and we started talking.'

²⁴⁶ Some respondents described momentary spiritual experiences and interpreted them as interactions with God, although they did not have the framework or desire to take action on their encounters. On interview: Daniel said, 'I had a, I don't know how to describe it, I had a strange, mystical experience at one point when I was in my teenage years, but I wasn't in the right frame of mind to make sense of it or to deal with it. And then the following day I was left with just thinking...I have a distinct memory of it...The following day, I was just scratching my head, thinking, 'Oh that was stupid. Don't be ridiculous. You are just imagining things.' He described a second 'numinous experience' years later convincing him that 'there was something to this' and precipitated openness towards conversion, stating, 'From there I started asking questions and I was open to the possibility for the first time.'

²⁴⁷ On interview: With openness towards God, Jeremy prayed and received answer through a spiritual encounter. He recalled, 'And so that night was my first prayer. I had a very, I thought I had strong philosophical and scientific evidence that something existed. It was like walking up to the door of the house. It was like I know something lives there but I have no idea what they are actually like. And so, my first prayer was something along the lines of "God, I have no idea of who

spiritual experiences due to the perceived personal action of an independent supernatural reality/person by the respondent, also in response to prayer.²⁴⁸

At the Conversion Stage, spiritual experiences precipitating conversion were reportedly both external (SEe) and/or internal (SEi) in nature. While in an existential low point, they typically cried out to the spiritual world and found themselves recipients of extraordinary dreams, vision, and/or encounters of darkness or light.²⁴⁹ Scott characterized

you are or what you are, and I am not sure one hundred percent that you exist, but if you do, I want to know more about you.” The response there, it was only one of two times in my life that I had one of those profoundly overwhelming spiritual experiences...

I had this very distinct impression that time was either slowing down or stretching out if that makes sense. I was only there in that moment less than a minute certainly, but it was just really like, and I just remember coming out of it feeling dazed, like ‘Oh my goodness, what actually was that?’ It was very much, you know, there was something physiologically that seemed to be going on there. And I think for me it was the sense of peace, the almost raw reality is like you are kind of...looking at a hazy photograph of a sunset and then sort of like maybe just pulling down the edge and seeing something that like, wait a minute, this thing actually, actually exists in reality. And I remember there was just this tremendous sense of awe. Again, I had no, my theology was not intact in have to say this, I know about this, but it was just that, this experience of this thing is so much larger than me and is so much more powerful. It was that kind of thing. It was one of those kinds of experiences of godly fear is how I would describe it as now. Is like this thing can, talk about an existential crisis, this thing can un-create me. This is this tremendously powerful thing, but it is also this is tremendously good thing. I wasn’t scared in that sense, but very much respecting that this thing is really powerful.’

²⁴⁸On interview: David, desirous to leave his life of drugs, in a moment of desperation prayed to God for help and encountered a ‘providential circumstance,’ changing his mind about the existence of God. He recalled, ‘The reason I was [out of state] was because I had been kicked out of the house by my mom because she, because I was so reckless. I don’t blame her now but at the time I was like, “Whatever.” So about 3 o’clock in the morning I called my sister up one night and I said, I just explained where I was, and I said, “I need to come home.” She was like, “It is 3 o’clock in the morning right now. Go back to sleep. I will call mom in the morning and we will get you out of there one way or another.” And when I got off the phone, like I said, I did not believe in God anymore. But I actually said a prayer. I said, “God, if you are real, I need your help. I need out of this.” I was 22 at this time. So, I am on the phone and I went to sleep. My sister called me right before 8 o’clock in the morning. She said, “I just got off the phone with mom. You can come home. We don’t know how we are going to get you home, but we are going to make it happen. You hold on.” And I no sooner then hung up the phone and the phone rang again. And this time it was my cousin. I was in [one city] and it was my cousin from [a different state] who happened to be driving to [the city where I was] for three days and wanted to see me. And I was like, “Oh my freaking gosh. Oh my God, God is real!” I was just like, “holy...” It blew me away.’

²⁴⁹On interview: Emotionally numb and physically compromised from a destructive lifestyle, James ‘called out to Satan and to God for help.’ He reported encounters with both. Describing his life-changing religious experience with God: ‘And all of the sudden, it was like a veil was starting to be taken away. I was starting to see things. God is real, and I think I’ve known that all along that I have suppressed that thought. I hated that thought. I know he existed, but I just hated him. And all of a sudden, this warfare was going on in my mind about it all and the more she [his cousin] talked, the more sense it made. I clearly at that point understood that I was a sinner because I had taken pages from the Bible and made, just ripped them out and use them to roll marijuana joints and persecuted Christians verbally, thought they were complete idiots. And, so, all of a sudden, I realized if God is real, then I am really, really a bad person, I mean just vile. I am a wicked, wicked sinner. It was very, very clear to me. It was just crystal-clear. I didn’t think there was anything whatsoever good in me at all. It was all just wicked and vile. This was just very, very clear.’

James continued, ‘At this time, the room filled with light, and it was just like an amazing, amazing kind of light. It was a light that I had never seen before. The light was alive. The light had power. The light was full of love. It was the most wonderful thing to see. And as I was feeling this, I felt so sinful. If there was a trap door that just opened directly to Hell, it would be 100% justified, it would be totally right. But just as I was feeling this extreme sin; and, at the same moment this light came and spoke to me. I didn’t see the form, but I heard the voice audibly, it said, “I forgive you.” And...42 years later, I still cry when I think about it. When I heard that, I just collapsed. I fell on the floor and I was bawling my eyes out. “You forgive me?” Then I understood what love and salvation were all about. I understood that Jesus was fully perfect and that was 100% truth. And, I didn’t know how to say, “Jesus come into my heart.” I just knew that I was giving him my heart. And, when I came out of it and I looked at my cousin – I was totally Biblically illiterate, and I said... I am a completely different person. I am completely different! And I am going to live the rest of my life for Jesus Christ because I know he is the truth. So that is what I been trying to do since.’ The subsequent encounter with Satan was highly vivid in description and powerful towards informing his personal life direction (against Satan, for God), serving as a Christian missionary since those experiences.

his religious encounter (SEe) akin to an overwhelming ‘out of body experience’ out of which he moved from darkness and depression to light and life.²⁵⁰ Dennis described a strong ‘act of nature’ with God’s powerful action upon his life.²⁵¹ Actively seeking towards God commonly brought about religious experience, but did not necessarily serve as a prerequisite for an encounter.²⁵² Post-conversion Spiritual Experiential (SEe) encounters also served as experiential confirmation of prior intellectual belief.²⁵³

7.3.2.2. Spiritual Experiential, internal (SEi)

Internal spiritual encounters (SEi) were described by subjects as sensing a strong inner response (personal conviction, awe, insight, emotion, unusual sense of compelling towards prayer, action) towards the person of God (Holy Spirit, Jesus) or through the words

²⁵⁰ On interview: Lost in depression, Scott described his life-changing experience: ‘At that moment, it was so heavy on my soul that I just cried out of my soul, not to God because I didn’t believe in God. I cried, and as I cried out in complete desperation, my soul left my body and that’s when I had an out of body experience. And I felt like I was in Jesus’ hand at that moment. And I saw my whole life coming in front of my eyes. It was better than a Hollywood movie. It was so beautiful. And I don’t know how long it lasted because once you are out of your body there is no concept of time. There is no time, so it lasted like it was hours but at the same time when I came back to my body it was instantaneous. I saw my whole life and how God had walked with me and carried me through my whole life. And all the moments when I felt were the loneliest times of my life how God had been there for me and walked with me...Try to explain to me how someone goes from being one second one of the most lonely, most depressed person in the world to the next second to being the most fulfilled and the most happy and at peace person in the world. How do you explain that? Go ahead. Try. You can’t. So, when I came back to my body, I was born again. I was absolutely a new creation. A new heart. As a matter of fact, my heart was so full of love, I couldn’t stop crying. I had to unbutton my shirt. I thought it was going to explode out of my chest. I was so filled with joy and love and peace.’

²⁵¹ On interview: Dennis affirmed conversion through a spiritual experience during a thunderstorm one night: ‘My conversion was sudden and significant. The ‘mystical experience’ I believe was an encounter with the Holy Spirit who opened my eyes and caused an immediate worldview shift and subsequent shifting as prayers were answered.’

²⁵² On interview: A life-long Atheist, Susan described her disinterest in God (even though a close friend had been recently converted and spoke with her about it). One night she was awakened out of deep sleep and was compelled to turn on the television and watch an old evangelistic crusade during which she reportedly had a religious experience (described as ‘a spiritual orgasm’) and immediately gave her life to Christ. She stated, ‘It was definitely a supernatural experience. The word ‘condemned’ popping into my head. I never had an experience like that again nor do I expect to. I don’t like the whole charismatic thing...It is hard to describe because I have never. You experience it once and you don’t know what is going to happen. It was like nothing that I had ever, ever felt before. When I read about Pentecost, I think, “Gee, that’s probably how they felt.” [I felt] a warmth, Oh, a warmth! It was almost a heat. But it was a wonderful, if I want to say heat more than warmth. It was a real comforting peaceful feeling. It wasn’t like it burns or anything that like. It was wonderful! Just for a moment. The whole thing was so fast - in the blink of an eye. I am still just stunned by the whole thing.’

²⁵³ On interview: After ‘trying on’ Christianity, Todd encountered a spiritual experience which confirmed his intellectual belief. He recalled, ‘I was sitting in [a non-charismatic] church on a Sunday. Church was very routine. We had been coming for 3-4 years and I had decided to try the Christianity thing sincerely...so here is a Sunday in which I am completely disconnected emotionally, mentally and intellectually from everything that was going on. It was like, I didn’t get anything out of it really, just kind of going through the motions. They did a song at the end...and the song hits this peak of the song and at that moment, I don’t know if I heard it or felt it, but it was like a snap and I lost all of my motor skills. I collapsed into my chair and I fell forward, and tears just started pouring out of my eyes. I felt this like warmth and peace and this like sensation blow into the room, into the auditorium, like I felt it was everywhere. It was all around me. All of my nerves were turned upside down, like I felt like an inverted porcupine, like when your foot falls to sleep, a prickly sensation, but everywhere. I just felt like I had been electrocuted. Totally. I remember trying to grab my wife’s hand because I thought something was wrong with me. I had lost all of my motor skills. And so, I grabbed her hand and I squeezed. The song finished because it was almost done, and slowly, as the song finished, I was able to sit up and felt like I was really weak, like exercising or something like that...Oh, and when I was incapacitated, I felt the words. I had a feeling or an impression that if I could put it to words it would say, “Everything is going to be okay.” So, I guess, these words of comfort...And I just stood in the corner and knew that I had just had some spiritual experience.’

of God (Bible).²⁵⁴ These experiences were presumed to be spiritual in nature rather than merely natural experiences and occurred predominantly at the Conversion Stage. Internal spiritual experiences (SEi) were often described as a compelling response to the holy presence of God or moral conviction of the Holy Spirit²⁵⁵ upon their lives prompting repentance and religious conversion.²⁵⁶ The sobering inner experience of personal accountability and moral culpability before a transcendent yet personal, Holy God marked a momentous change and point of conversion, particularly as expressed by twenty (20) study participants during interview.²⁵⁷ Three (3) respondents reported experiencing an unexpected awakening from sleep or changing their normal activity, compelled towards unusual action (turning on evangelical television show and finding themselves ‘accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Savior’) after which also reported significant life change (sudden cessation of

²⁵⁴ On interview: Describing his reported religious experience, Christopher stated, ‘I guess it was, it wasn’t like a vision or anything like that but I was really feeling so strongly drawn to the character of Jesus and that was, it hard to explain the discord in my mind but I was thinking that Christianity is probably true being strongly, supernaturally, powerfully attracted to the person of Jesus but somehow still hating Christianity. I know it doesn’t make a lot of sense to say these things in concert but that is the discord that was going on in my mind and heart there. And the spiritual experience is when I would read or think anything about Jesus. And I just remember reading the Bible and literally shaking when I read the gospels because I just could not that there is a person like this, that this person was God, and that this person cared for me. Even though I wasn’t necessarily willing to jump in full boar at that point, that was like a draw on my heart that I felt needed an answer.’

²⁵⁵ On interview: After coming to a point of intellectual belief in the viability of Christianity, Aaron related his self-described ‘religious experience’: ‘I got to a point where I was persuaded that the resurrection [was true] and reading the Gospels. I got to the point where I had to do something about it. I knew too much to go back. I remember thinking that I think this is true. I got to the point where I felt convicted of the way I lived, and I needed to be made right with God. That conviction compelled me to repent to God to say sorry for the way I lived, for him to rid me of these selfish desires and try and live more for him. So that was my experience in a sense. I didn’t have a mystical experience. It was the cherry on the cake at the end because it wasn’t purely rational. I arrived at a rational conclusion, but it was combining the two and a sense that it made intellectual and emotional sense to repent. And I felt the conviction which was the Holy Spirit giving conviction and so I felt compelled to respond to that. So, it was an experience in a sense. Even in hindsight. Then experience makes sense in the context of Christianity being true.’

²⁵⁶ On interview: After becoming more open towards God, investigating the evidence and reading the Bible, Matthew described his religious experience: ‘And, at that point, the Holy Spirit just really convicted me. I could really sense that He was present and in the room and real. And so, it was kind of like a religious experience type of thing and at that point, the whole thing that I had been thinking about all the time – there is no meaning to life, and it is all transitory and passes away and everything, and then there’s this. And, I don’t want to say physically sense, but really sense a presence here. So, at that point I repented and got on my knees and I don’t even remember what I said, but at that point I was different. I was changed. I believe that is when I was born again...I would classify it as what a lot of people would call a religious experience. It definitely felt, it seemed really real. And, I mean, I was becoming more and more open to Christianity...And, having that experience, it was unmistakable. [Tell me more about your experience. What did you feel?] Definitely forgiveness. It was like a two-ton weight just lifted off of my shoulders...Yeah, and just a real strong sense of forgiveness and ahhh, like wow, this is really real, not just a fairy tale. I was just kind of shocked and overwhelmed.’

²⁵⁷ Repentance is generally part of the religious conversion process as understood within orthodox Christianity. Although twenty subjects particularly verbalized this experience, it is presumed that most if not all subjects experienced perhaps an unstated repentance, understanding their personal need for forgiveness and salvation as provided through the person and action of Jesus Christ.

drug, alcohol, tobacco use or additive gambling after years of abuse,²⁵⁸ sudden desire towards seeking knowledge of God through Bible study). At times, a spiritual encounter was accompanied by a heightened emotional response.²⁵⁹ Three respondents described a palpable sense of heaviness, weight and/or darkness removed from them during or immediately following conversion.²⁶⁰

7.3.2.3. Spiritual Experiences (SE) Summary

The nature of experience is profound, convincing to the one who experiences it but transient and perhaps not convincing to others. In fact, those who experience ‘other-worldly’ numinous encounters reported hesitance to speak of them, particularly as an apologetic to other Atheists. They feared the experience would not be deemed credible, negatively contributing to the perceived superstitious nature of religious belief.²⁶¹ Regardless, many

²⁵⁸ On interview: Carl felt the weight of his prolonged years of poor choices and need for God. He stated, ‘In all of this, I did have a love for the truth and the truth was that I was a compulsive, gambling, lying alcoholic. And I realized that that morning, which is the first stage of dealing with any addiction is that you have to come out of denial about it. This was a sin addiction. I fully realize that. All of a sudden, I was convicted by the reality of God and by my sin at 7:30 in the morning going down the highway. The conviction was of the sort that this realization came bubbling up from my subconscious into my conscious mind. Now I had been going to church with my wife for most of 1998 primarily to get her off of my back about the drinking and the gambling that she knew about. I couldn’t wait to get out of church every Sunday and go to the golf course and do my favorite thing. But God had been convicting me subconsciously about his reality and about my sin. So, I literally cried out to God at that point and I didn’t promise anything. I turned my life over to him as I understood him. I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior as I understood Him. I confessed my sins as I understood them. I did not promise anything other than that the next moment I would submit to God’s will the next moment, because I didn’t know if I could make it two moments.’

²⁵⁹ On interview: Reluctantly attending a religious retreat at the invitation of a friend, Don initially ‘felt nothing,’ but later experienced an uncontrollable deluge of emotion. He recalled, ‘And, the first place, whatever I was feeling, this thing rising in me, I took three or four rolls of toilet paper and I rushed to this little chapel and the door was opened but I couldn’t find the light switch. I couldn’t find my way around. Eventually I found the light switch and I got down on my knees and that was it. Everything, just everything came out. I virtually saw my life flash, but the bad parts of my life flashed. I cried and cried and cried. More. It just wouldn’t stop. It was like, the most incredible sadness I’ve ever felt in my life. And, it was a massive purge. And, I was on my knees and I was just saying, ‘I can’t believe what is happening. I don’t know what is happening. I don’t know what is happening.’ Later I started feeling better. And, I just thought, “Okay. This is bigger than me.” And, I just looked up and I said, “Lord, if you exist, show me now. Now. I want to know.” And, the halo on the painting lit up. That’s all I could see was the halo. It lit up. It was like someone had a light beam behind it, and it is an oil painting. That’s all I saw was that halo. I thought this was someone playing a trick on me. But, when I had finished, I cried for three hours. I just purged and purged and purged for three solid hours. When I went back, it must have been 4 in the morning, I felt like a new person, like someone had taken a brush, shoved it down my throat and cleaned out everything.’

²⁶⁰ On interview: After reading a book, *The Battle for the Mind* (describing the differences in humanism and Christianity), Tom was sobered by the dark implications of humanism. He recalled, ‘Well, I hear, and I don’t like that. So, it actually put a physical pain in my chest. There is a pain in here [pointing to his chest.] It was there for several months. And then one night, I picked up a book that my Atheist sister had given me called *Mere Christianity*... So, as I was reading this it was making sense – the proofs for the existence of God, the conscience that he has put in our heart. I know that’s there and that’s proof of God’s existence... There was this battle going on in my mind. And I felt like I was hanging onto something, trying to let go and saying, “Okay, I believe I am a sinner and I deserve to go to hell and Jesus died for my sins and I trust you with my life.”... That is when the little pain here [pointing to his chest] left and it never came back.’

²⁶¹ On interview: Self-reflecting on the potentially negative value of talking to non-believers in God too soon about his religious experience, Todd stated, ‘I know how I would have received it, so I don’t feel hesitation to tell the story, but I do hesitate telling it too soon at the wrong time without a relationship between me and the receiver without a lot of other things. I am very delicate with the story, I should say. Because I think it would have been a wall if I had heard a story like that prior to becoming a Christian. It would not have been a help. It would have been a wall.’

expressed the need to ground their ‘non-rational’²⁶² experience beyond its transience (even if personally profoundly convincing) in order to justify holding and sustaining intellectual truths asserted by and through the Christian worldview. As Atheists generally hold themselves to be highly rational individuals, it is not surprising that two respondents actively sought natural, physical explanations for their extraordinary religious experiences.²⁶³

Substance of belief in a spiritual being (God) as real in essence, being, and personal interaction as substantiated through Spiritual Experiences (SE) warrants serious consideration in the process of religious conversion of the naturalistic Atheist to Christianity. The considerable weight of religious experience as influential as catalyst or as a convincing component in the conversion process bears significance, as acknowledged and described by the participants in this research study. Its non-inclusion potentially reduces a comprehensive understanding the conversion process.

7.3.3. Substance, a Positive Contributor towards Religious Conversion

In response to thesis question B1, quantitative and qualitative analysis confirmed positive presence of Substance, both Substance Intellectual (SI) and Spiritual Experiential (SE), as contributing to the religious conversion process at Catalyst, Conversion, and post-Conversion Stages.

²⁶² For clarity: Not ‘irrational’ but rather ‘non-rational’ experience.

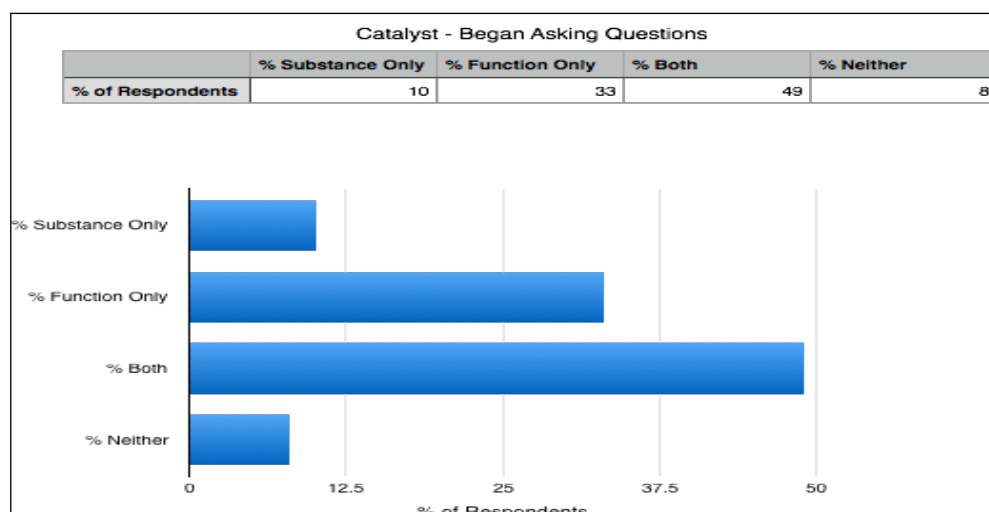
²⁶³ On interview: Following his spiritual experience, Todd sought explanation through neurological testing of his brain. He stated, ‘As I analyzed it later...after that [I] got a physical with all of the electrodes on you and all of that stuff. I am still an analyst of sorts.’ Zach described an experience whereby his eyes inexplicably ‘fluttered’ during a moment of prayer, disturbing him. He sought explanation through Atheist Richard Dawkins’ website, stating: ‘But I remember getting prayed for, my eyes started fluttering. So, it was a very weird experience. I remember sitting on a bench...being a bit dumbfounded by it. I remembered e-mailing or trying to e-mail Richard Dawkins’ Institute asking for a physiological explanation of why, when I am getting prayed for, that my eyes should flutter...And after that experience I think I went from Atheism to agnosticism. I still had my doubts, but I was more open to it.’ He later experienced it again and attributed it to a spiritual source.

7.4. Quantitative Analysis Summary

7.4.1. Summary - Function and Substance Variables, Catalyst Stage

At the Catalyst Stage, Substance and Function influences prompted movement towards conversion either in isolation or in tandem. Function was more primary than Substance, although an integration of both was most prominently observed as shown here:²⁶⁴

Figure 20. Substance and Function Variables, Catalyst Stage



Based upon the quantitative survey responses, approximately half (49%) ‘began asking questions about Christianity’ for both Substance and Function reasons; one-third (33%) were motivated for Function alone; and, one-tenth (10%) were motivated for Substance alone.








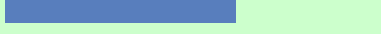








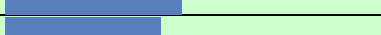
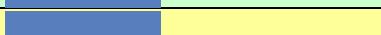


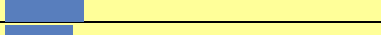
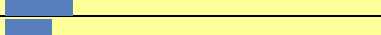



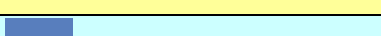


7.4.2. Function and Substance Variables, Conversion Stage

Substantive beliefs and functional motivations are not held in a vacuum but are informed and confirmed through a matrix of reasons. On survey, respondents were queried as to their primary reasons (Q29) for religious conversion; and, their responses demonstrated an integrated presence of Substance and Function. Although previously reported in isolated categories, this chart allows comparison of Substance and Function variables in order of prevalence per (color coded) category:²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴ These numbers were determined through calculation of the number of Substance and/or Function endorsements per question.

²⁶⁵ Color coding: Green – Substance Intellectual (SI); Blue – Spiritual Experiential (SEe and SEi); Yellow – Function (F) variables.

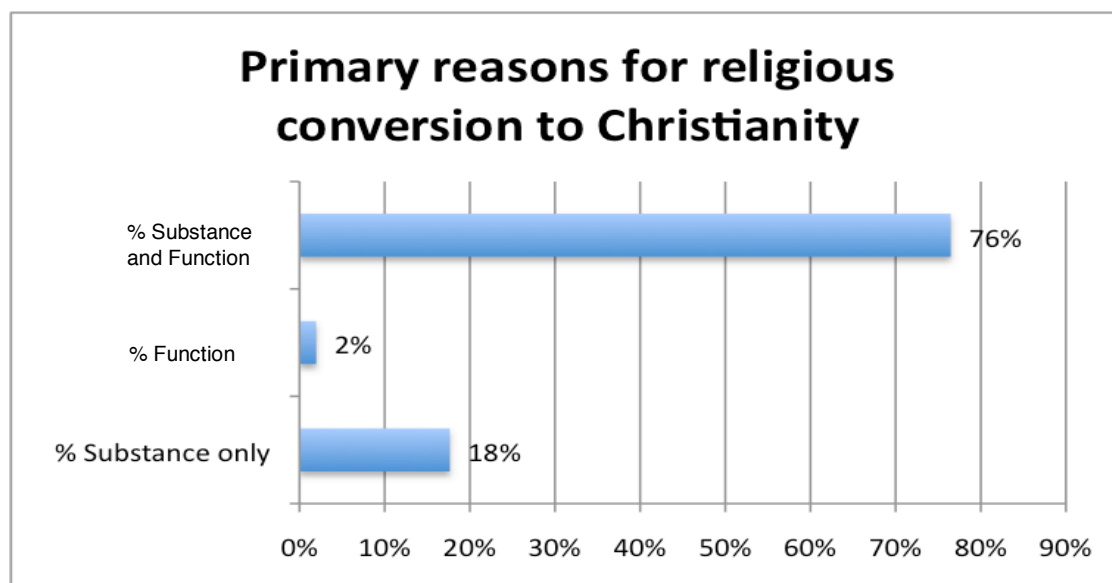
Table 24. (Q29) Survey Analysis: Function and Substance Variables, Conversion Stage

Q29. My primary reason(s) for changing towards belief in God and conversion to Christianity was/were: (please select all that apply)			
SUBSTANCE Intellectual			
SUBSTANCE Spiritual Experiential			
FUNCTION			
Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
the life and claims of Jesus Christ	33	66.0%	
evidence for the resurrection of Jesus	26	52.0%	
truth of the Bible	24	48.0%	
a change in my willingness to be open, to seek truth (will)	24	48.0%	
rationality of Christian belief	23	46.0%	
a religious / mystical experience	22	44.0%	
objective evidence for God, philosophical	21	42.0%	
positive intellectual consequences, deepened rational understanding of God, the world, and myself	20	40.0%	
subjective evidence for God, personal	20	40.0%	
positive personal experience with religious people (soc/exp)	19	38.0%	
reconcilability between science and religion	18	36.0%	
objective evidence for God, historical	18	36.0%	
objective moral grounding	17	34.0%	
forgiveness of sin/reconciliation with God	16	32.0%	
loving actions of Christians (soc/exp)	16	32.0%	
objective evidence for God, scientific	15	30.0%	
exposure to Christian belief, generally	13	26.0%	
positive emotional consequences, a sense of purpose, meaning, fulfillment (exist)	13	26.0%	
answered prayer	11	22.0%	
helps understand others' suffering (exp)	6	12.0%	
Christian church (soc/exp)	5	10.0%	
positive social consequences, a sense of belonging (soc/exp)	4	8.0%	
lives of Christian leaders (soc/exp)	3	6.0%	
helps deal with personal pain (emot)	2	4.0%	
positive vocational consequences (soc)	0	0.0%	
Other (please specify)	6	12.0%	
Other (please specify)	2	4.0%	
Other (please specify)	1	2.0%	
Total Responses	418		

According to survey responses (Q29) Substance Intellectual (SI) component of belief played the primary role at the Conversion Stage. Spiritual Experiential (SE) and Function (F) motivations played a present but secondary role. Function components were reported as least important in conversion as compared to Substance Intellectual and/or Spiritual Experiential components. These findings affirmed the considerable influence of Substance

components in the religious conversion process. Substance content positively affected religious conversion of Atheists to Christianity, three-quarters (76%) in conjunction with functional factors, and nearly one-fifth (18%) reported conversion was borne upon substantive content alone, a total of 96%.²⁶⁶ Conversely, solely Function motivations constituted only 2% (only one respondent) at the Conversion Stage:

Figure 21. Survey Analysis, Substance and Function Percentage, Conversion Stage



These findings confirm the complex, integrated nature of religious conversion. Justin articulated the need for Substance and Function in the religious conversion process, stating:

My conversion has both the intellectual component of understanding those matters and those strong emotional, experiential components of receiving those truths for myself – which, by God’s grace happened both at the same time. I asked every once and a while, ‘Well which one was most important?’ I think it would be very unwise to compare them and say one has to be more important than the other because I am convinced that both are absolutely essential to any conversion.

That is, *if you don’t have the intellectual aspect*, that you might have this spiritual experience of some sort that it is not going to carry you through difficult times and you think if I don’t have any good reasons to believe that God exists or that the Bible is true or that Jesus is who he claimed to be in my experience is going to be just that, an experience... *But on the other hand, if it is purely intellectual*, then you are not a Christian. Just intellectual belief that there is one God and that Jesus is who he claimed to be doesn’t make one a Christian. James tells us very clearly that even the demons believe this much. So, there is this *change of heart, changes of emotion, an existential cry* out to God. ‘I understand intellectually that the gospel is true, but please give me your salvation freely the way that you promised that you would.’

²⁶⁶ Two respondents (4%) did not complete Q29; therefore, the total percentage = 96% rather than 100%.

And so those *two things* happened about at the same time when my *intellectual* barriers were starting to break down, some of my questions were starting to be answered; but at the same time there was this *experiential*, strong recollection of the central thing that I had done that God just brought back into my face and crippled me with guilt to be in a place where I would understand – ‘Yeah, well, guilt, that’s the problem. And the answer to guilt is not denial but forgiveness.’ And so, I received the gospel because I realized it was not just true, but it was needed.²⁶⁷

A cohesion of thought and experience, of emotional, existential, and spiritual felt need in light of the believed reality of God provides unification of ‘faith and reason’ and wholeness for an individual, sense-making of reality. Comparably, Dennis expressed, ‘*It was so invigorating and exciting to know that not only did I have a faith that gave purpose to life, but it also made sense from what I understood from reason.*’²⁶⁸

7.4.3. Function and Substance Variables, Across Stages

An informed perspective on religious conversion entails appreciating its developmental context, including the dynamic process of conversion from Atheist to Catalyst and Conversion Stages. Survey results demonstrated an integration of Function and Substance influence from Catalyst to Conversion; however, respective weight of Function and/or Substance varied through the process.

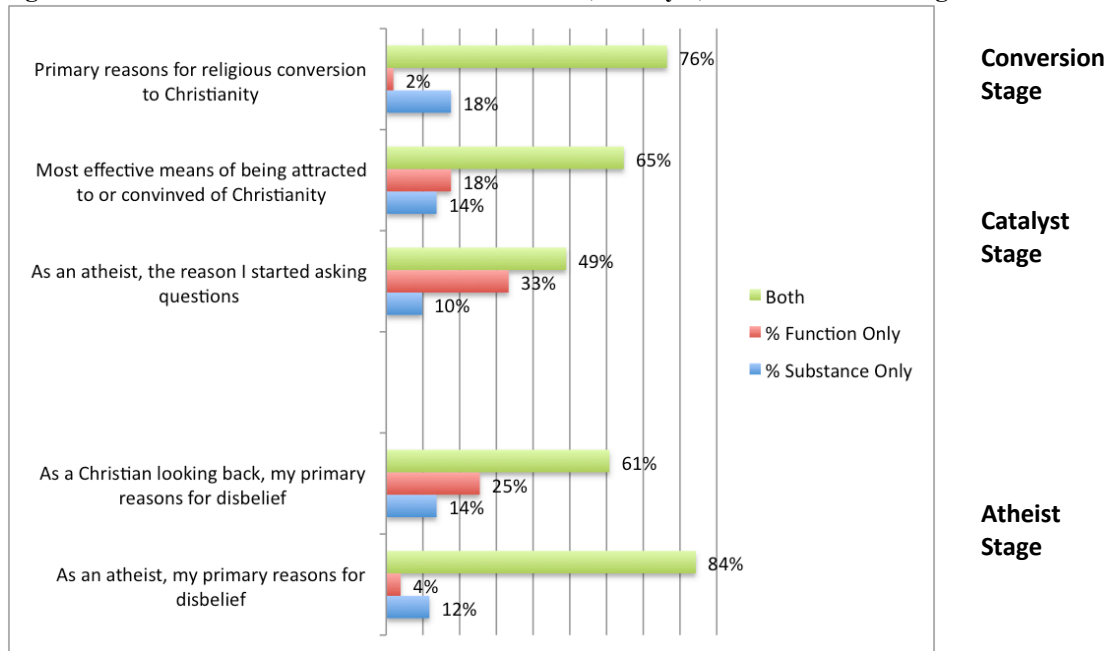
At the Atheist Stage, a combination of Substance and Function variables were most commonly reported (84%) (Q13); (61%) (Q24); Function only reasons increased from 4% (‘as an Atheist,’ (Q13) to 25% (Christian retrospective, (Q24)); and, Substance only reasons were similar at both queries. At the Catalyst Stage, a strong majority (82%) reported Function influence as a positive motivator to soften resistance, break down prior negative social, emotional, experiential and/or intellectual stereotypes of Christians and Christian belief, and allowed them to willingly investigate the reality of God. One-third of respondents

²⁶⁷ Interview, Justin. This respondent moved from no felt need for God or forgiveness to a place of personal guilt once he realized the source of all goodness and morality and his culpability before Him.

²⁶⁸ Interview, Dennis. Initially living with a sense of cognitive dissonance on the lack of integration of his new Christian beliefs, he eventually found substantive grounding precipitating a sense of functional and substantive wholeness. He stated, ‘It started to dawn upon me that I do not have to live with cognitive dissonance with my faith and my reasoning... For the next 15 years, I really studied philosophy and apologetics and read hundreds of books. I can’t tell you how many books I have read. But it didn’t take that long to get to a point where I felt comfortable with faith and reason, probably after the third or fourth book, I was like, “Wow I cannot believe I was in the dark, that I thought that I was going to have to live with that discomfort.”’

(33%) (Q18) conveyed solely Function catalyst as instrumental; whereas, one-half (49%) (Q18) reported a combination of Function and Substance influences as catalysts. Only ten percent (10%) (Q18) reported Substance catalyst alone.

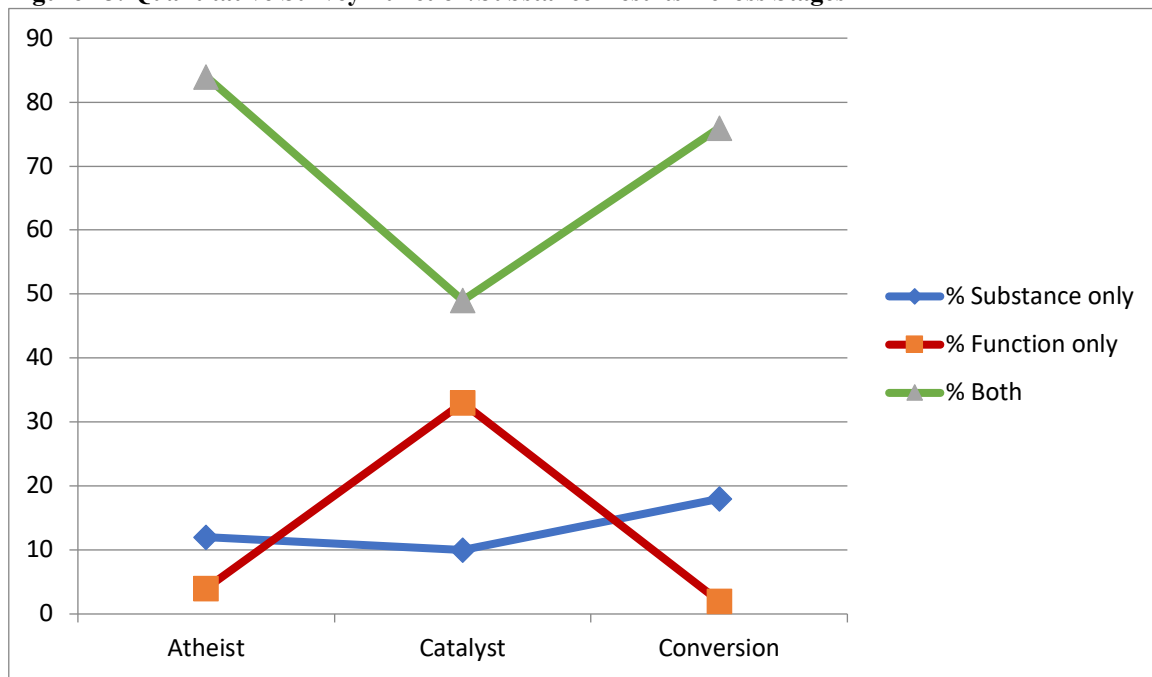
Figure 22. Substance/Function Influences at Atheist, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages



(Quantitative Analysis based upon Surveys)

Movement from Catalyst to Conversion Stages entailed decreased ‘Function only’ influence (from 33% to 2%) (Q29), an increase of Substance only influence (from 10% to 18%) (Q29), as well as an overall increase of Substance and Function together. Significantly, nine-four percent (94%) (Q29) reported that their ‘primary reasons for changing towards belief in God and conversion to Christianity’ incorporated an integrated combination of both Function and Substance influences. This overall pattern across Atheist, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages is demonstrated below:

Figure 23. Quantitative Survey Function/Substance Results Across Stages²⁶⁹



7.5. Discussion: Substance, an Integral Component of Conversion

In view of thesis question B1, it is clear from quantitative and qualitative findings that Substance of belief played a critical role in the conversion process, particularly in combination with Function motivations.²⁷⁰ At the Catalyst Stage, Function served a dominant role in the initial stages towards conversion but was not fully explanatory in the religious conversion process. The majority of research subjects reported a resistance towards change and/or consideration of Substance Intellectual evidence prior to conversion; however, Function prompted a willingness to consider theistic belief as a viable option. Functional variables deconstructed prior stereotypes through social engagement and/or acknowledged internal emotional and/or experiential dissatisfactions in order to allow movement in positive willingness to contemplate another competing perspective. As conversion entailed cognitive belief of asserted truths about reality, Function motivations alone proved inadequate for the vast majority of respondents at the Conversion Stage. Only one subject reported religious conversion for merely functional reasons. The remaining majority required substantive

²⁶⁹ Based upon SoGoSurvey questions (Q13), (Q18), and (Q29).

²⁷⁰ Substance alone (10%) + Substance/Function combination (49%) = 59% substantive influence as catalyst.

veracity along with functional influences in order to realize conversion or were ultimately convinced due to substantive influences alone. The next section examines data collected from qualitative interviews and reveals diverse Function and Substance patterns within religious conversion.

7.6. Religious Conversion Patterns.

Religious conversions are as unique as each individual. However, when assessed collectively, conversion patterns emerge. Auto-narratives, the emic perspective, provide insight and rich description of personal experience or phenomenon. Function or Substance catalyst conversion patterns emerged and are reported in this section.

Table 25. Variable Abbreviations

FUNCTION	F
social	soc
cultural	cult
emotional	emot
experiential	exp
existential	exist
moral	mor
SUBSTANCE Intellectual	SI
intellectual	int
SUBSTANCE Spiritual Experiential	SE
Spiritual experiential - external	SE(e)
Spiritual experiential - internal	SE(i)

Semi-structured interviews were analyzed as to Function and Substance influences at Atheist, Catalyst, Conversion, and Post-Conversion Stages. Qualitative assessment of each subject's interview was accomplished through extensive theme coding using NVivo for Mac. Religious conversion patterns were

developed based upon the presence (positive or negative), timing (temporality/order of effect), and role (degree of presence as low/high) of Substance and Function influences at Atheist, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages.²⁷¹ Conversion patterns were designated as 'Substance Catalyst' or 'Function Catalyst' due to initiating presence of Substance or Function as prompting openness towards change from Atheism towards Christianity. Detailed religious conversion patterns per group and individuals are located in the Appendix for review.²⁷²

²⁷¹ In analysis, the researcher attempted to refrain from excess hetero-interpretation through the categorization process, although complete neutrality is unavoidable in order to assess weight of Function or Substance influence as low or high.

²⁷² Examples of coding for Catalyst Stage: F soc – started dating and/or met a Christian, became more interested in Christianity; F cult – moved to a community where exposure to Christian belief more prominent; began exploring; F emot – depression from life circumstances prompted openness towards searching; F exp – life event precipitated change in perspective; pragmatic experience with Christians broke preconceived negative stereotype allowing reconsideration; F exist – sense of meaninglessness, purposelessness and/or loss of personal value prompted willing search for 'something more'; SI

7.6.1. Substance Catalyst Religious Conversion Patterns

Substance Catalyst religious conversion patterns are profiles of individuals who reported substantive influences Substance Intellectual (SI) and/or Spiritual Experiential (SE) as prompting a quest towards and/or belief in spirituality, in God, and/or Christianity. Respondents in Substance Catalyst patterns are those who described (a) an intentional pursuit to disprove the truth and reality of God, although were inadvertently surprised by the convincing nature of logic, arguments, and evidence for theism and the Christian worldview; (b) a sincere search regarding the veracity of claims regarding God and/or Christianity; (c) an intentional pursuit of inquiry in order to resolve felt cognitive dissonance between held Atheistic worldview and intellectual coherence with reality; or, (d) a response to a compelling spiritual experience prompting belief or further inquiry.

Substance Catalyst patterns may or may not have been accompanied by Function and/or Spiritual Experiential influence. Four (4) Substance Catalyst religious conversion patterns were observed, including eight total subjects (8/50; 16.0%) in total, with ‘high’ or ‘low’ presence of Function. Within Substance Catalyst profiles, five of eight subjects were female (5/8; 62.5%); three of eight were male (3/8; 37.5%). The patterns include:

7.6.1.1. S1: SI High / SE Low / F Low

Catalyst and Conversion Stages were primarily motivated by Substance Intellectual (SI) factors. Spiritual Experiential (SE) and/or Functional (F) components were low (weak or absent) at Catalyst Stage, although increased at Conversion Stage. Post-conversion, subjects reported continued high value of Substance Intellectual components as grounding ongoing belief. Three subjects (3/50; 6.0%) displayed this profile in the study; (3/8; 37.50% of Substance Catalyst subjects).

cognitive dissonance - unanswered questions from within Atheistic naturalistic worldview opened the door for further consideration of a supernatural reality; and/or sought to disprove intellectual tenets of the Christian (or other religious) worldview(s); SE(e) spiritual experience prompted from an external spiritual source as per respondent’s auto-interpretation of the event (e.g. profound dream, vision, experience); SE(i) spiritual experience/response to felt or sensed spiritual reality.

7.6.1.2. S2: SI High / SE Low / F High

Both Catalyst and Conversion Stages were primarily motivated by Substance Intellectual (SI) and Function (F) elements. Spiritual Experiential (SE) components were low. Post-conversion, subjects reported continued high value of Substance Intellectual components as grounding ongoing belief. Two subjects (2/50; 4.0%) displayed this profile in the study (2/8; 25.0% of Substance Catalyst subjects).

7.6.1.3. S3: SI High / SE High / F High

Catalyst Stage was mainly motivated by Substance Intellectual (SI) and Conversion Stage was primarily Substance Intellectual (SI) and Spiritual Experiential (SE) components. Functional component was also high. Post-conversion, subjects reported continued high value of Substance Intellectual components as grounding ongoing belief. Two subjects (2/50; 4.0%) met this profile in this study (2/8; 25% of Substance Catalyst subjects).

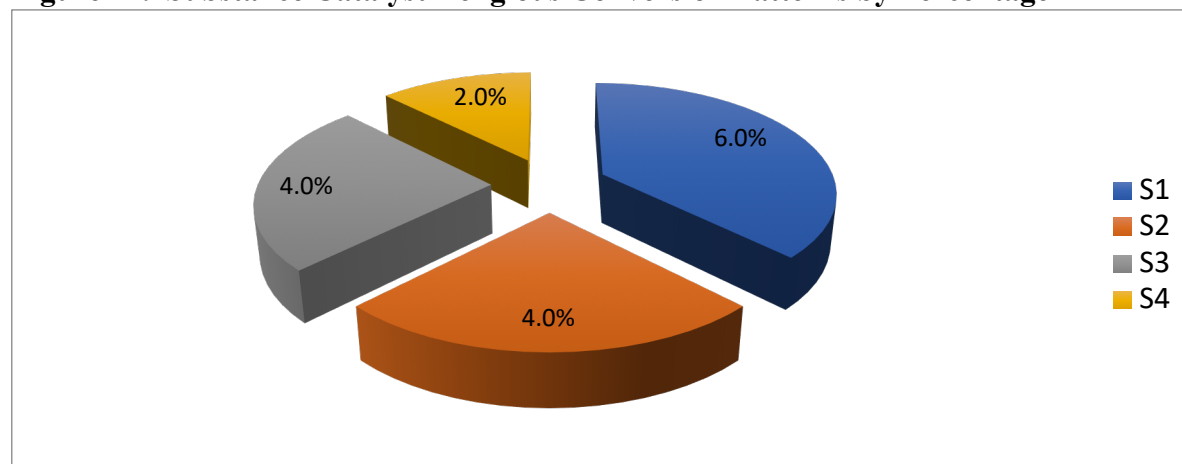
7.6.1.4. S4: SI Low / SE High / F Low

Catalyst and Conversion Stages reported as Spiritual Experiential (SE) in nature. Functional component was weak/absent. Post-Conversion Stage predominantly Substance Intellectual in nature for confirmation of belief. One subject (1/50; 2.0%) met this profile (1/8; 12.50% of Substance Catalyst subjects). Post-conversion, the subject reported continued high value of Substance Intellectual components as grounding ongoing belief.

Figure 24 demonstrates a cumulative low number of subjects (8/50; 16.0%) who reported Substance Catalyst conversion patterns with a small range of subjects among the patterns (1-3 subjects per group). Within these eight respondents, half (4/8; 50%) demonstrated high Substance (SI and/or SE) and low Function (S1 and S4 patterns); (4/50; 8.0% of total number of respondents). The majority (7/8; 87.50%) confirmed a strong intellectual journey (SI) at the Catalyst and Conversion Stages, with variable levels of Functional (F) influence. The highest number of Substance Catalyst conversions, pattern S1 (3/8; 37.0%), reflected a strong intellectual journey (SI) at Catalyst and Conversion Stages with little Function influence. Substance Catalyst patterns S2 and S3 each comprised one-

quarter (2/8) respectively, demonstrating elevated levels of Function concurrent with Substance influential at the Conversion Stage.

Figure 24. Substance Catalyst Religious Conversion Patterns by Percentage



S1: SI High / SE Low / F Low (3/50; 6.0%)

S2: SI High / SE Low / F High (2/50; 4.0%)

S3: SI High / SE High / F High (2/50; 4.0%)

S4: SI Low / SE High / F Low (1/50; 2.0%)

Patterns S3 and S4 included Spiritual Experiential (SE) components with varying degrees of Function (F) and/or Substance Intellectual (SI) influence. Pattern S3 yielded twenty-five percent (2/8) Substance primary, allowing for high Substance Intellectual (SI), Spiritual Experiential (SE) and Function influences (F); and, Pattern S4 contained only one subject (1/8; 12.5%) with high Spiritual Experiential (SE) component at Catalyst and Conversion Stages and low Function (F) and/or Substance Intellectual (SI) involvement.

7.6.1.5. Discussion, Substance Catalyst Conversion Patterns

As discussed in Chapter 4, educated Atheists generally possess a strong self-perception of rational superiority, particularly as compared to religious believers. Oftentimes, Atheists initially present primary reasons for disbelief in God and Christianity due to the perceived irrationality and irreconcilability of religious belief with logic, reason, evidence and science. Resistance towards conversion partially comes from its seeming intellectual impotence. Alteration of belief and subsequent life change entails sufficient warrant for belief and avoidance of self-deception. It is not surprising, then, that some Atheists initially sought towards objective disproof or grounding of religious worldviews, motivated by Substance catalysts. Function variables were also instrumental, although secondary, in three of four patterns. Within the broad context of this research study, those

who were initially motivated towards religious conversion by Substance catalysts remained in the minority. Regardless, the presence of Substance as a viable motivator in the initial stages of conversion warrants its serious consideration as a variable in order to provide a more comprehensive representation of religious conversion experience.

7.6.2. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Patterns

Function Catalyst patterns are profiles of individuals who reported Function influences (i.e., socio-cultural (soc) (cult), psycho-emotional (emot), experiential (exp), existential (exist), and/or moral (mor) as prompting a quest towards and/or belief in spirituality generally, in God, and/or Christianity. Respondents are characterized by those who described (a) an intentional pursuit to satisfy socio-cultural conformity, needs and/or expectations; (b) a positive social encounter and/or experience with a Christian who prompted reconsideration of held prejudices and/or beliefs; (c) an intentional pursuit towards religious belief in order to relieve emotional and/or existential dissonance between held Atheistic worldview and experiential reality; and/or (d) positive and/or negative life experience prompting reconsideration of and openness towards an alternative worldview. Five (5) Function Catalyst religious conversion patterns were identified, including forty-three total subjects (42/50; 84.0%) in total. The patterns included:

7.6.2.1. F1: F High / SI Low / SE Low

Catalyst and Conversion Stages were primarily motivated by Function. Substance Intellectual (SI) and/or Spiritual Experiential (SE) components were weak or absent. Post-conversion, subject reported continued religious belief through ongoing bible study. One subject (1/50; 2.0%) met this profile (1/43; 2.32% of Function Catalyst subjects).

7.6.2.2. F2: F High / SI High / SE Low

Catalyst Stage was primarily motivated by Function. At the Conversion Stage, Function (F) and Substance Intellectual (SI) components were high; and, Spiritual Experiential (SE) component was weak or absent. Post-conversion, subjects reported high

value of Substance Intellectual (SI) grounding of belief. Eight subjects (8/50; 16.0%) met this profile in the study (8/43; 18.60% within Function Catalyst subjects).

7.6.2.3. F3: F High / SI High / SE(i) High

Catalyst Stage was primarily motivated by Function. During the Conversion Stage, Functional (F) varied in influence from low-high; Substance Intellectual (SI) and/or Spiritual Experiential (internal) (SEi) component(s) were high during conversion process. Post-conversion, subjects reported continued high value of Substance. Fifteen subjects (15/50; 30.0%) met this profile in the study (15/43; 34.88% within Function Catalyst subjects).

7.6.2.4. F4: F High / SI High / SE(e) High

Catalyst Stage was primarily motivated by Function, although one subject was prompted towards quest due to a Spiritual Experience (external) (SEe). At the Conversion Stage, Function (F), Substance Intellectual (SI), and/or Spiritual Experiential (external) (SEe) component(s) were high during or after conversion process. Spiritual experiential (internal) (SEi) was intermittently present. Post-conversion, subjects reported value for Substance Intellectual (SI) grounding of Spiritual Experiential (SE) component; and/or, encountered Spiritual Experience (SEe) as confirmation Substance Intellectual (SI) belief. Eight subjects (8/50; 16.0%) met this profile in the study (8/43; 18.60% of Function Catalyst subjects).

7.6.2.5. F5: F High / SI Low / SE(e)(i) High

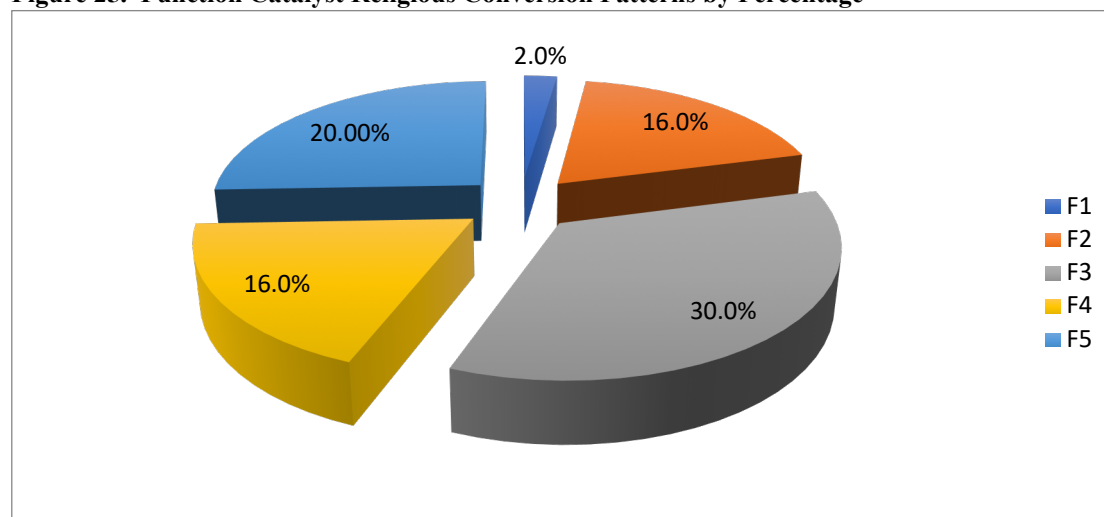
Catalyst Stage was primarily motivated by Function. Spiritual Experiential (external) (SEe) component was high during or prompting the Conversion Stage; and, Spiritual Experiential (internal) (SEi) and Function (F) were intermittently present. Substance Intellectual (SI) was weak/absent during Catalyst and Conversion Stages; however, post-conversion, Substance Intellectual (SI) was high for the majority of subjects. Ten subjects (10/50; 20.0%) met this profile in this study (10/43; 23.25% of Function Catalyst subjects).

7.6.2.6. Discussion, Function Catalyst Conversion Patterns

Function Catalyst religious conversion patterns were dominant for the majority of respondents (42/50; 84.0%) in this study. Function components primarily served to

precipitate an open willingness towards spirituality and/or religious belief (in addition to secondary Substance variables) for most subjects. However, Function maintained and/or diminished as the role of Substance (SI, SE(e) and/or (SEi)) increased in the conversion process. Only one subject (#47) within this group (1/42; 2.38%) demonstrated a Function-only conversion (from Catalyst to Conversion without Substance components).

Figure 25. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Patterns by Percentage



F1: F High / S Low / SE Low (2.0%)

F3: F High / SI High / SEi High (30.0%)

F5: F High / SI Low / SEei High (20.0%)

F2: F High / SI High / SE Low (16.0%)

F4: F High / SI High / SEe High (16.0%)

The majority (41/42; 97.61%) demonstrated high SI and/or SE at the Conversion Stage. Figure 10. demonstrates a cumulative high number of subjects (42/50; 84.0%) who reported Function Catalyst conversion patterns with a variable range of subjects among the patterns (8-15 subjects for 4/5 groups; 1 subject for one group, an outlier). Within these forty-two respondents, nearly one-third of all study respondents (15/50; 30.0%) constituted the most prevalent conversion pattern F3 integrating high levels of Function (F), Substance Intellectual (SI), and Spiritual Experiential (internal (SEi)) components. One-fifth of respondents (10/50; 20.0%) presented a high Function, high Spiritual Experiential (external) profile F5. Importantly, nine of ten in this F5 pattern sought to intellectually ground their conversion experience through post-conversion study, specifically through apologetics. Eight subjects (8/50; 16.0%) each represented Function Catalyst patterns F2 and F4. Both included high Function (F) and high Substance Intellectual (SI); and, F4 also included Spiritual

Experiential, external (SEe). Finally, the lowest occurring Functional Catalyst pattern was F1 in which one subject demonstrated a socially motivated Function-only conversion.

7.6.3. Religious Conversion Patterns, Substance and Function

The prominent trend among Substance Catalyst and/or Function Catalyst religious conversions demonstrated a mixture of influences. Interview narratives revealed the timing and presence of influences and confirmed a multi-dimensional process. While Function influences played a critical role at the Catalyst Stage, Substance content, whether Substance Intellectual (SI) and/or Spiritual Experiential (SEe)(i), played an increasingly important role at the Conversion and post-Conversion Stages.

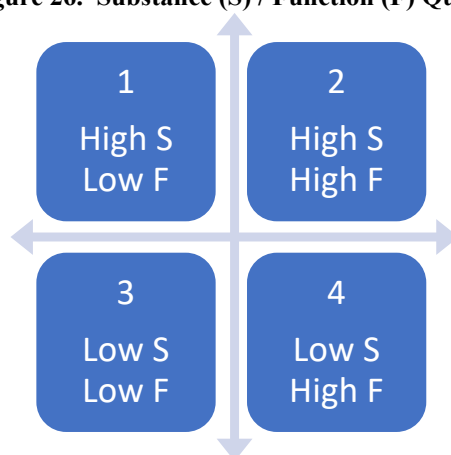
7.7. Comprehensive Religious Conversion Patterns – Quadrant Analysis

In order to simplify this comprehensive view of conversion a quadrant analysis was completed to provide a sense of general patterns and temporal progression of the process.

7.7.1. Substance (S) Function (F) Quadrant

Each qualitative interview was scored for quadrant pattern analysis (high or low Substance; high or low Function) in Atheism, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages.²⁷³

Figure 26. Substance (S) / Function (F) Quadrant

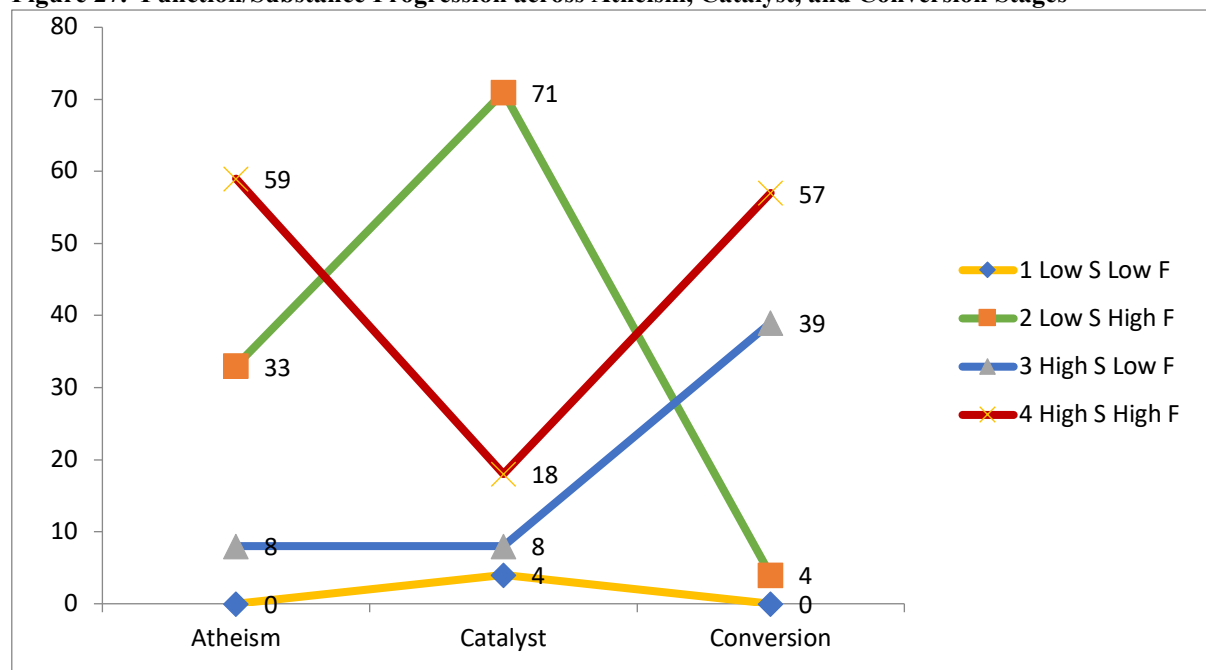


Based upon the cumulative value of each quadrant per stage, qualitative quadrant analysis of Substance and Function per stage. Qualitative quadrant analysis demonstrated an integration of high Substance/high Function at Atheism and Conversion Stages, high Function/low

²⁷³ The qualitative quadrant values were determined by temporal primacy at Catalyst Stage of Substance and/or Function; and, subjectively weighted primary at Conversion Stage of Substance and/or Function.

Substance at Catalyst Stage; and, high Substance/low Function at the Conversion Stage. A critical drop in high Function/low Substance was observed from Catalyst to the Conversion Stage, indicating Function only variables as insufficient to precipitate conversion for most subjects. Specifically, quadrant analysis revealed Function influences (high F/low S) played a prominent role at the Catalyst Stage (71%) or as integrated with Substance (high F/high S) (18%) allowing a change in openness, interest, and willingness towards pursuit and understanding of belief in God and Christianity (a total of 89% of subjects). However, Function decreased as Substance influence increased at the Conversion Stage. High Function/low Substance dropped from 71% at the Catalyst Stage to 4% at the Conversion Stage. High Function/high Substance rose from 18% at Catalyst Stage to 57% at Conversion Stage. Simultaneously, high Substance/low Function rose from 8% at Catalyst Stage to 39% at Conversion Stage.

Figure 27. Function/Substance Progression across Atheism, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages



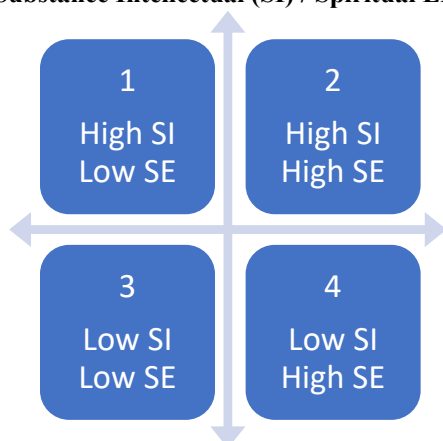
In total, high Substance influence increased from 26% at Catalyst Stage to 96% (57% high S/high F + 39% high S/low F) at Conversion Stage. Overall, high Function decreased from 89% at Catalyst Stage to 61% (57% high S/high F + 4% low S/high F) at Conversion Stage. This important finding warrants attention. While Function motivations primarily serve to precipitate a willingness to consider another perspective, it remained insufficient to

explain the fullness of conversion in the life of the Atheist to Christianity. Substance played a prominent role in the progress of moving from Catalyst to Conversion. At Conversion, integration of high Substance and high Function was 57%.

7.7.2. Substance Intellectual (SI) / Spiritual Experiential (SE) Quadrant

Analysis was conducted using a quadrant to determine content of Substance in conversion, whether Substance Intellectual (SI) and/or Spiritual Experiential (SE) in nature or expression as conveyed by the respondent. Religious Conversion Patterns S1, S2, S3, F2, F3, F4, or F5 included Substance Intellectual (SI) variables; and, Religious Conversion Patterns S3, S4, F3, F4, and F5 included Spiritual Experiential (SE) components at the Atheist, Catalyst, Conversion and/or Post-Conversion Stages.

Figure 28. Substance Intellectual (SI) / Spiritual Experiential (SE) Quadrant

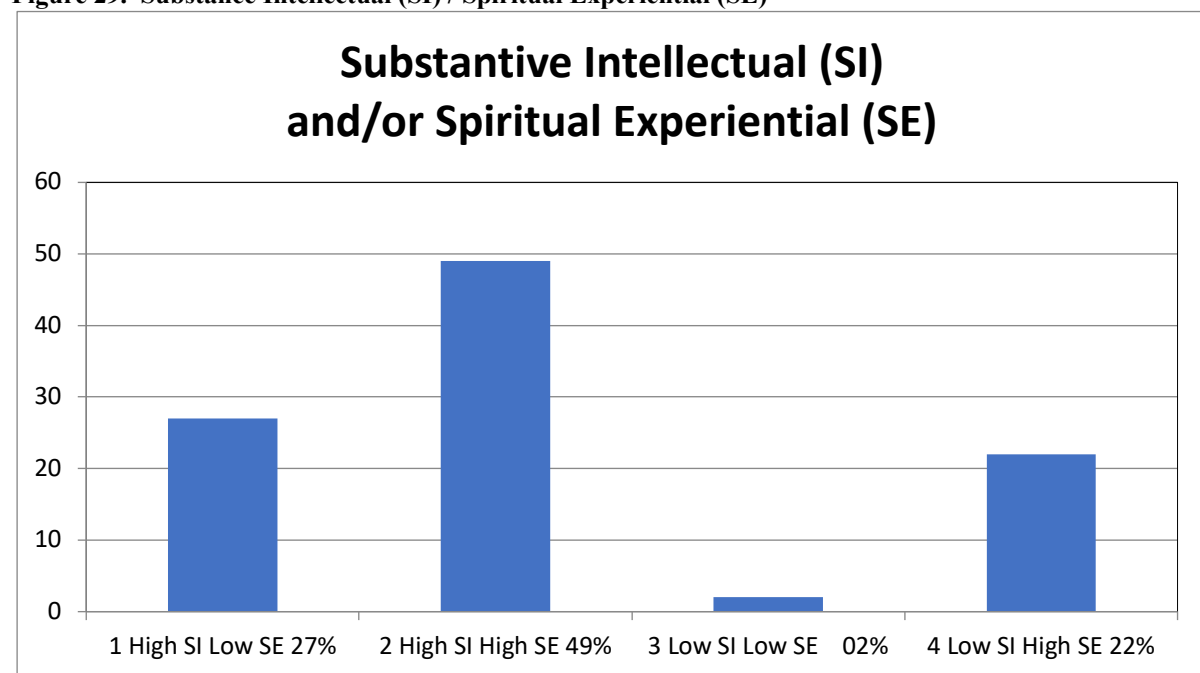


Quadrant analysis revealed high Substance Intellectual (SI) played a predominant role for three-quarters (76%) within the category of Substance.²⁷⁴ High Spiritual Experiential (SEi) and SE(e) also contributed to three-quarters (71%) of religious conversion experience.²⁷⁵ Approximately one-quarter reported either Substance Intellectual or Spiritual Experiential (27% or 22% respectively). The remaining one-half (49%) affirmed both Substance Intellectual (SI) and Spiritual Experiential (SE) as viable conversion variables.

²⁷⁴ This majority includes High SI/Low SE (27%) with the addition of High SI/High SE (49%).

²⁷⁵ Seventy-one % includes High SI/High SE (49%) and Low SI/High SE (22%).

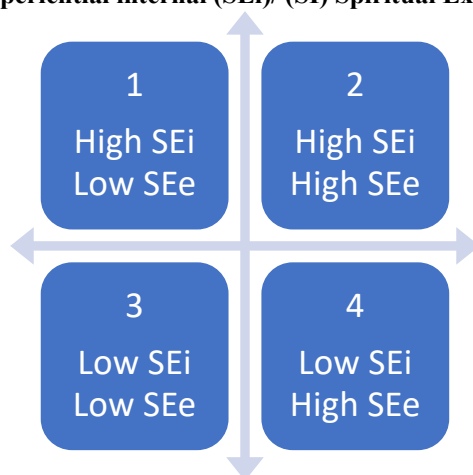
Figure 29. Substance Intellectual (SI) / Spiritual Experiential (SE)



7.7.3. Spiritual Experiential Internal (SEi) and External (SEe) Quadrant

Further analysis was conducted using a quadrant (as below) to determine content of the Spiritual Experiential component, whether Spiritual Experiential internal (SEi) and/or Spiritual Experiential (SEe).

Figure 30. Spiritual Experiential internal (SEi)/ (SI) Spiritual Experiential external (SEe) Quadrant

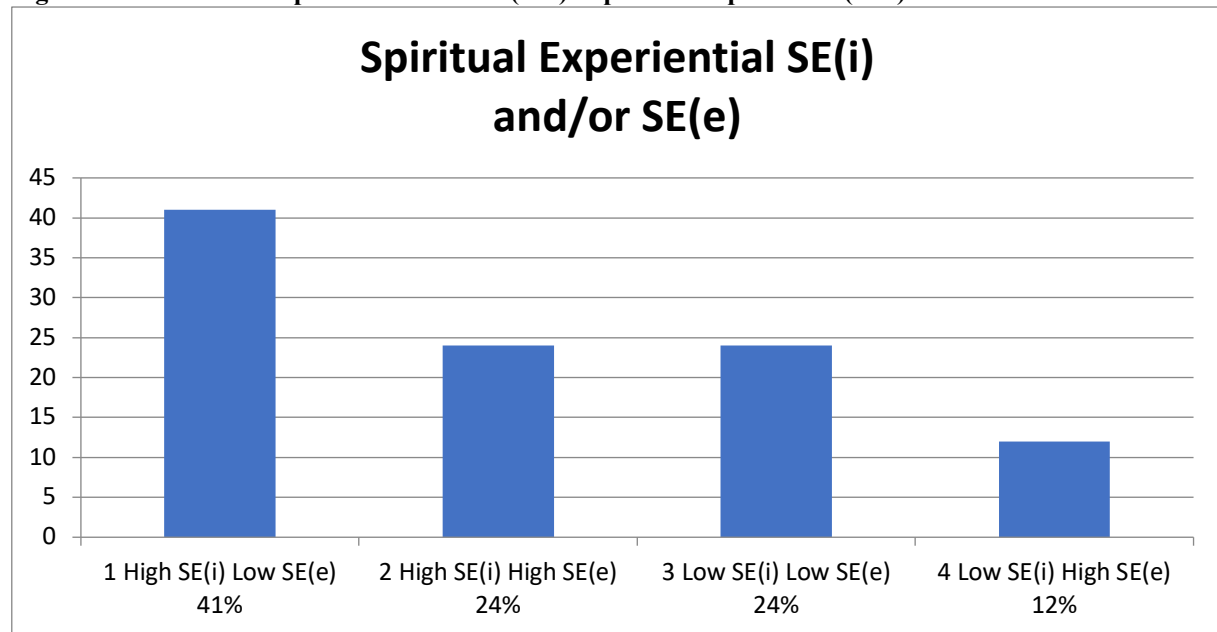


Analysis revealed the Spiritual Experiential subcategory was predominantly Spiritual Experiential internal (SEi) in nature, comprising nearly two-thirds (65%).²⁷⁶ Spiritual Experiential external (SEe) were reported by approximately one-third of respondents (36%)

²⁷⁶ Total Spiritual Experiential internal (SEi) included High SEi/Low SEe (41%) plus High SEi/High SEe (24%).

of those who reported some form of religious experience.²⁷⁷ One-quarter of those within Substance reported religious experiences (24%) reported encountering both internal and external occurrences (High SEi / High SEe). Approximately one-quarter of subjects within Substance category (24%) reported little/no religious experiences (Low SEi or Low SEe).

Figure 31. Substance Experiential Internal (SEi) / Spiritual Experiential (SEe)



7.7.4. Quadrant Analysis: Numerical Quadrant Patterns

Quadrant numbers were assigned to each respective research subject's patterns per category based upon qualitative interview narratives. Similar numerical patterns within respective conversion patterns (S1-S4; F1-F5) are in a table located in the Appendix.

7.8. Conclusion: Data Analyses Results Confirmed Substance in Conversion

In response to thesis question B1, qualitative findings confirmed prominence of high Substance at Atheist and Conversion Stages, high Function as prominent at Catalyst Stage. However, a descriptive integration of high Substance and Function was demonstrated at the Conversion Stage for the majority of respondents. The next step in this research process is analytical comparison of quantitative survey data to qualitative interview data to assess whether similar trends and findings were found in this mixed-method study.

²⁷⁷ Total Spiritual Experiential external (SEe) included High SEe/Low SE(i) (12%) plus High SE(e)/High SE(i) (24%).

8.0. TRIANGULATION of QUANTITATIVE and QUALITATIVE DATA

8.1. Introduction

Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data was conducted in order to determine convergence and/or divergence of data patterns found in each respective method of study.

8.2. Quantitative Data Analysis

8.2.1. Presence of Substance and Function at Three Time Points

Thesis question B1 considers Substance- and Function-related motivations in religious conversion. Quantitative data analysis was conducted at three time points to determine the presence and significance of Substance and Function at Atheist, Catalyst and Conversion Stages. In addition, demographic variables were statistically analyzed to determine significance as related to the data. SoGoSurvey questions were identified that best represented Substance and/or Function components at each stage²⁷⁸ and then coded through SPSS for analysis.²⁷⁹ Scores were calculated based upon the highest number of endorsement

²⁷⁸ Initial survey design did not take into consideration discrete staging of conversion, definitively separating Catalyst and Conversion. However, through post-survey analysis, it became evident that certain questions evoked clarity upon catalytic influences versus those leading towards conversion. Other questions, while informative as to their generalized influence towards Atheism and/or conversion, did not provide the specificity required for staging; therefore, results of those questions are included for consideration in the Quantitative Descriptive Analysis Chapters 4 and 5.

²⁷⁹ Atheist Stage: Questions 13 and 24, primary reasons for disbelief in God and Christianity: Substance = SI (substance intellectual) + SE (spiritual experiential). SI = @13Irrationality; @13Irreconcilability; @13Lack Evidence Science; @13Supernatural Claims; @13Lack Evidence Philosophical; @13Lack Evidence Historical; @24a Perceived rational superiority of Atheism; @24h Perceived incompatibility between science and religion; SE = @13Lack Evidence Personal; @13 Unanswered Prayer; Function = @13Christians; @13Personal Pain; @13Suffering Others; @13Hypocrisy Leaders; @13 Hypocrisy Institutions; @13Christian Intolerance; @13Negative Social; @13Negative Vocational; @13Moral Constraints; @13Lack Exposure; @13Unwillingness; @24bDesire to make life choices without moral restraint; @24cPersonal pain and suffering fostered doubt; @24dEvil, pain and suffering in the world caused doubt regarding Gods existence; @24eNo perceived need of God; @24f Influences from significant life relationships social; @24gProfessional academic pressures for peer respect and/or promotion.

Catalyst Stage: Questions 17 (openness to theism), 18 (reasons began asking questions), and 23 (means attracted to or convinced of the Christian faith): Substance SI + SE; SI = @17Seriously considered evidence and depth of Christian thought; @17Actively authentically searched for truth about God; @18Resolve growing tensions between my worldview and my intellectual understanding of the world; @18Disprove and/or discredit Christianity; @23investigating evidences for Christianity; @23Observing rationale of knowledgeable Christians regarding their beliefs; SE = @18Respond to a religious mystical experience; @18Respond to a dream or vision; @23Intentionally ask God to reveal himself, to reveal truth; @23Encountering a religious experience with God; Function = @17Emotionally desired meaningful contented lives of Christians; @17Appreciated moral integrity of Christians; @17 Socially enjoyed close relationships with Christians; @18 seek greater meaning purpose and happiness; @18Resolve growing tensions between my worldview and my emotional wellbeing; @18Satisfy significant relationship; @18Find sense of belonging acceptance and social community; @18Cope with significant life crisis; @23Observing Christians lives; @23Making decision to open myself to truth; @23Experiencing personal life crisis; @23Joining in religious activities; @23Searching for meaning and purpose in life; @23Personal care and concern from a Christian; @17 I wanted to believe that Christianity was true but couldn't.

Conversion Stage: Substance SI + SE; SI = Question 29 (primary reasons for changing towards belief in God and conversion to Christianity) @29rationality of Christian belief; @29reconcilability between science and religion; @29objective evidence for God, scientific; @29objective moral grounding; @29truth of the Bible; @29objective evidence for God, philosophical; @29objective evidence for God, historical; @29positive intellectual consequences deepened rational understanding; @29evidence for the resurrection of Jesus; @29the life and claims of Jesus Christ; SE = @29subjective evidence for God,

by at least one person, taking into account the actual behavior of the scale within the group rather than the number of potential responses.²⁸⁰ Repeated-measures ANOVA²⁸¹ were conducted measuring percentage of respective Substance and/or Function endorsement.

First, Substance was tested through a Repeated-Measures ANOVA²⁸² at three time points using dependent variables of Atheism Substance percentage, Catalyst Substance percentage, and Conversion Substance percentage.²⁸³ Results demonstrated no significant difference across Substance time points ($p = .784$).²⁸⁴

Function was subsequently tested through a Repeated-Measures ANOVA at three time points using dependent variables of Atheist Function percentage, Catalyst Function percentage, and Conversion Function percentage. Results demonstrated a significant difference across Function time points ($p \leq .001$).²⁸⁵ In order to determine the variance across time points, a paired T-Test was performed. Results revealed no significant difference for Function at the Atheism ($X = .490$) and Catalyst ($X = .286$) stages ($p = .462$). The finding for Function at the Conversion Stage ($X = .210$) bordered on significance. The lowered percentage suggested decreased importance of Function influence beyond the Catalyst Stage ($p = .09$).

personal; @29answered prayer; @29forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God; @29a religious mystical experience; Function =@29positive personal experience with religious people; @29helps deal with personal pain in my life; @29helps understand suffering in the lives of others; @29religious lives of Christian leaders; @29Christian church; @29loving actions of Christians; @29positive social consequences, a sense of belonging; @29positive vocational consequences for belief; @29exposure to Christian belief generally; @29positive emotional consequences, a sense of purpose meaning and fulfillment; @29a change in my willingness to be open to seek truth.

²⁸⁰ Calculating Percentage of Endorsement. The rationale for calculating number of options selected versus potential options accounts for variability in responses as well as allowing for lack of clarity and/or viability of pre-established responses. Thus, presence of endorsement was deemed more viable by dividing by the highest numbers that were selected than by the highest number that were available. Atheist Substance was divided by 10 (e.g., COMPUTE AthSubPercent=AtheistSubstance /10.); Atheist Function was divided by 11; Catalyst Substance was divided by 6; Catalyst Function was divided by 7; Conversion Substance was divided by 14; Conversion Function was divided by 11.

²⁸¹ ANOVA – Analysis of Variance: a statistical test looking for significant differences between means within and between groups.

²⁸² SPSS General Linear Model.

²⁸³ Multivariate testing was performed with Pillai's Trace, Wilks' Lambda, Hotelling's Trace, and Roy's Largest Root. No significant variance was found. Mauchly's Test of Sphericity was also performed, yielding adequate results.

²⁸⁴ Tests of Between-Subjects Effects demonstrated a significant different between subjects on Substance ($p = .000$). This finding is not surprising and is reflected in descriptive analysis (Chapter 5) and in quadrant findings (discussed later in this chapter).

²⁸⁵ Test of Between-Subjects Effects for Function also yielded significance ($p = .000$); again, not surprising that individuals demonstrated high variance among one another.

8.2.2. Comparison of Substance and Function at Three Time Points

Repeated-Measures ANOVA was performed analyzing Substance minus Function in order to determine which bore greater influence, if any, at three times points (Atheism, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages).²⁸⁶ Overall, the differences between all three were highly significant ($p < .001$) However, a follow-up paired-sample t-test showed there was no significant difference between the Atheism ($X = .0425$) and Catalyst ($X = .0514$) stages ($p = .873$). The substantial increase was observed between the first two stages and the Conversion Stage ($X = .246$). This increase demonstrated a much greater percentage of Substance over Function at the Conversion Stage.

Distribution of scores was analyzed in order to assess the data range at each time point. At the Atheist Stage, frequency analysis revealed 24/50 (48.0%) subjects with negative scores, indicating Function scores were higher than Substance scores for slightly less than half of respondents. Negative scores ranged from $-.03$ to $-.82$, indicating a notable spread in number of Function responses (over Substance responses) across individuals. Conversely, slightly more than half of subjects (27/50; 54.0%) yielded positive scores, indicating Substance scores were higher. Positive scores ranged from $.03$ to $.61$, also denoting a notable spread in the number of Substance over Function responses. Although the spread is noteworthy for both negative and positive scores, the mean of $.0257$ for the Atheist Stage was low due to the cancelling effect on both sides.

At the Catalyst Stage, frequency analysis yielded a pattern shift. Negative scores (Function higher than Substance) obtained for approximately one-third of respondents (18/50; 36.0%) with scores ranging from $-.02$ to -0.67 , slightly reduced from the Atheist Stage. Alternatively, two-thirds of participants (33/50; 66.0%) presented with positive scores (Substance higher than Function) ranged from 0.00 to 0.57 with a moderate spread in the

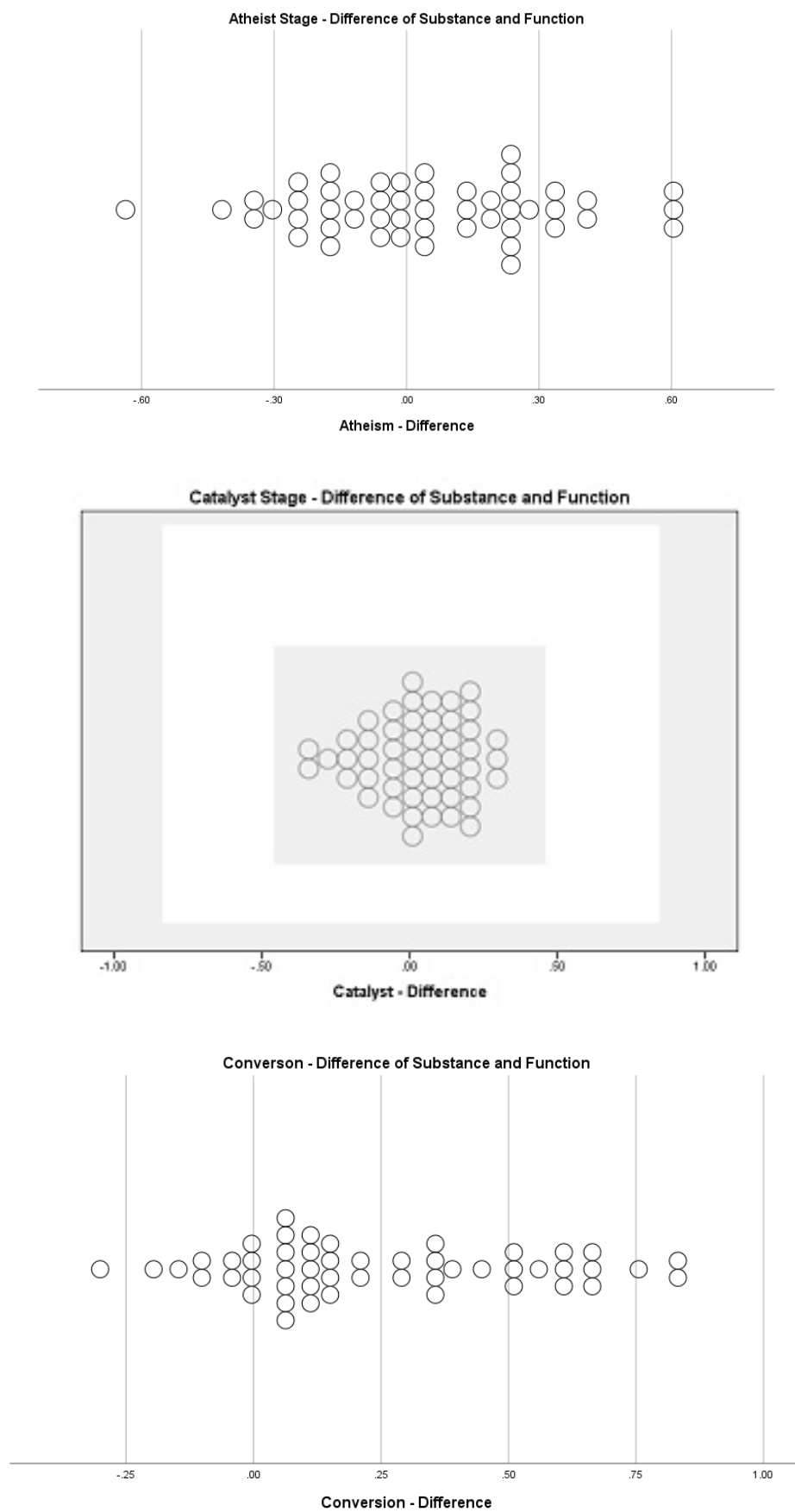
²⁸⁶ When Substance is subtracted from Function, a negative number denotes Function was higher than Substance (i.e., if Substance is 5 and Function was 7, $5-7 = -2$, a negative number); Whereas, a positive number indicates Substance is higher than Function (i.e., if Substance is 6 and Function is 4, then $6-4 = 2$, a positive number.) Thus, Atheist change = $\text{AthSubPercent} - \text{AthFuncPercent}$; Catalyst Change = $\text{CatSubPercent} - \text{CatFuncPercent}$; and, Conversion change = $\text{ConSubPercent} - \text{ConFuncPercent}$.

number of Substance over Function responses. However, the overall Catalyst Stage mean of .0579 remained low due to the positive/negative cancelling effect.

At the Conversion Stage, this evolving pattern yielded a difference reaching statistical significance. Substance variables played a significantly stronger role at Conversion than Function variables. Negative scores (Function higher than Substance) severely contracted to a clear minority of subjects (8/50; 16.0%) with frequency range reduced (-.01 to -.30). Positive scores (Substance higher than Function) rose to a strong majority of subjects (43/50; 86.0%) with higher frequency scores ranging higher from .00 to 0.83. At Conversion, seven participants scored higher on positive scores than any subject scored on the prior two stages.²⁸⁷ Across the three time points, a rough equivalence of Substance and Function scores at the first two time points was determined present, allowing for a slight decrease in Function and increase in Substance at the Catalyst Stage. However, Substance dominated over Function at the final Conversion Stage with an increased mean of .25. Scatter plots were constructed for each time point to visually represent this overall pattern. Scatterplot patterns confirm an integrated presence of both Substance and Function throughout all three stages; however, the role of Substance over Function increased from the Atheist to Catalyst Stages and demonstrated a notable increase at the Conversion Stage. This patterning concurs with qualitative and quantitative descriptive measures confirming an integrated presence of both Substance and Function measures at all three stages, most prominently at the Conversion Stage. Further, this patterning provides a response to thesis queries C and D affirming the positive presence, timing, and role of Substance and Function in the process of conversion with Substance bearing greatest weight over Function at the Conversion Stage.

²⁸⁷ Highest positive score on prior two stages was .60 on Atheist Stage.

Figure 32. Scatterplot: Substance and Function at Atheist, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages



8.2.3. Comparison of Substance (SI and SE) at Two Time Points

Paired-Sample T-Tests were performed in order to differentiate categorical influence within Substance between Substance Intellectual (SI) components and Spiritual Experiential (SE) motivations towards belief at two time points, the Catalyst and Conversion Stages. Comparisons made within this quantitative data were limited due to the low number and inequity of potential responses in each respective category.²⁸⁸ Paired-sample T-Tests confirm a significant difference between SI average and SE average at the Atheist Stage ($p = .032$). Significance at the Atheist Stage suggests a noteworthy pattern of SI average as higher than the SE average. However, no significant difference was found between the SI average and SE average at either the Catalyst Stage ($p = .568$) or the Conversion Stage ($p = .645$).

8.3. Quantitative Analysis - Demographic Variables

Fifty (50) subjects participated in this mixed-method project. Of the subjects, ten were biological and gendered females (20.0%) and forty-one were biological and gendered males (80.0%). Reported age at time of religious conversion ranging from 16-57 years old (mean = 26.90; SD = 8.16);²⁸⁹ age at the time of the survey ranging from 22-73 years old (mean = 41.14);²⁹⁰ and, number of years post-conversion ranging from 1-42 (mean = 12.16).²⁹¹ Thirty-three subjects (33/50; 66.0%) reported geographic location as the United States of America, whereas eighteen subjects (17/50; 34.0%) reported geographic location from a non-US Western country.²⁹² Highest education level for respondents ranged from some college (N = 10; 20.0%), college degree (N = 20; 40.0%), Master's degree (N = 13; 26.0%); and PhD (N = 7; 13.73%).

²⁸⁸ Atheist Stage: SI average = 8.; SE average = 2.; Catalyst Stage: SI average = 6.; SE average = 4.; Conversion Stage: SI average = 10.; SE average = 4. Please see adjunct Qualitative SI/SE differentiation for further data analysis.

²⁸⁹ Age at religious conversion: 16-20 years, n = 14 (28.0%); 21-30 years, n = 27 (54.0%); 31-40 years old, n = 8 (16.0%); 41-50 years, n = 0 (0%); and, 51-57 years, n = 2 (4.0%).

²⁹⁰ Age at time of survey: 20-30 years, n = 7 (13.73%); 31-40 years, n = 18 (36.0%); 41-50 years, n = 14 (28.0%); and, 51-73 years, n = 12 (24.0%).

²⁹¹ Years post-conversion at time of survey: 1-5 years, n = 10 (20.0%); 6-10 years, n = 14 (28.0%); 11-20 years, n = 15 (30.0%); 21-42 years, n = 12 (24.0%).

²⁹² Non-US countries: United Kingdom, n = 7 (14.0%); Canada, n = 4 (8.0%); Australia and New Zealand, n = 4 (8.0%); France, n = 2 (4.0%).

Correlations were performed for six demographic variables to determine if each variable had a specific relationship with Substance and/or Function in religious conversion of Atheists to Christianity at three time points (i.e., Atheism, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages). The variables tested included gender, education, geographical location, age at the time of the survey, strength of Atheism,²⁹³ and years-post-conversion. For analysis, gender, and geographical location were dummy coded (male-coded as 0 and female-coded as 1; US/non-US with US as 1 and non-US as 0); for education, higher numbers meaning more education; and, strength of Atheism based upon their own self-rating.

Pearson Correlation determined no significant relationship between Substance scores and gender designation at each stage (Atheism $r = -.186$, $p = .197$; Catalyst $r = -.215$, $p = .134$; Conversion $r = -.053$; $p = .717$).²⁹⁴

Between Substance scores and geographical location of United States or non-United States, there is no significant relationship at any stage (Atheism $r = -.121$; $p = .404$; Catalyst $r = -.057$, $p = .695$; Conversion $r = -.118$, $p = .415$).

There is no significant relationship between Substance scores and strength of Atheism as weak or strong at each stage (Atheism $r = -.134$, $p = .354$; Catalyst $r = .067$, $p = .643$; Conversion $r = .076$, $p = .602$).

When measuring the relationship between Substance scores and education level, there is no significance at the Atheism and Conversion Stages, although a moderate sized significant correlation at the Catalyst Stage (Atheism $r = -.120$, $p = .408$; Catalyst $r = .112$, $p = .440$; Conversion $r = -.081$, $p = .577$). This indicates a tendency for those with higher education to have higher Substance scores at the Catalyst Stage.

²⁹³ Strength of Atheism was assessed using a continuous four-point scale from weak to strong: 1) 'I did not care whether or not God existed.' ($n = 3$; 6.0%); 2) 'I claimed to lack a belief in God.' ($n = 10$; 20.0%); 3) 'I strongly affirmed God's non-existence.' ($n = 24$; 47.10%); and, 4) 'I considered belief in God as dangerous and sought its removal from the public square.' ($n = 4$; 8.0%). Total respondents: $n = 41/50$ (82.0%). Remaining 10/50 (20.0%) were assigned a score based upon the individual's open text statement.

²⁹⁴ Ten females participated in this study (10/50; 20.0%). Of those females, 5/10; 50% completed 'some college' (two females) or hold a bachelor's degree (three females); 5/10 (50%) completed an advanced degree (two females hold a master's degree; three females hold a PhD).

The relationship between Substance scores and participant age was determined to be significant with a moderate negative correlation at Atheism and Conversion time points, and only slightly weaker at the Catalyst Stage (Atheism $r = .085$ $p = .558$; Catalyst $r = -.083$, $p = .567$; Conversion $r = -.039$, $p = .789$). This finding suggested younger people endorse more items on Substance and older people endorse fewer. Similarly, the negative correlations between Substance scores and years post-conversion also were significant (Atheism $r = .203$, $p = .157$; Catalyst $r = .049$, $p = .733$; Conversion $r = .239$, $p = .095$). This finding was not surprising in light of a suspected relationship between age and years post-conversion as older people have more years and form of lived experience, including religious conversion. A Pearson Correlation test confirmed very high correlation in the relationship between age and years post-conversion ($r = .78$, $p < .001$). Once age was accounted, years post-conversion did not meaningfully add to the explanation of outcome.

Lastly, Pearson Correlation testing confirmed no significant relationship between any of the six demographic variables and Function scores at any of the three time points.

8.4. Triangulation of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Mixed-method research was conducted in order to gain the benefits of both quantitative (survey) measures in addition to qualitative (interview) self-reflection at the Atheistic, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages of belief. According to Creswell (2015, p. 2), mixed method research is:

An approach to research...in which the investigator gathers both quantitative (closed-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data, integrates the two, and then draws interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand research problems.²⁹⁵

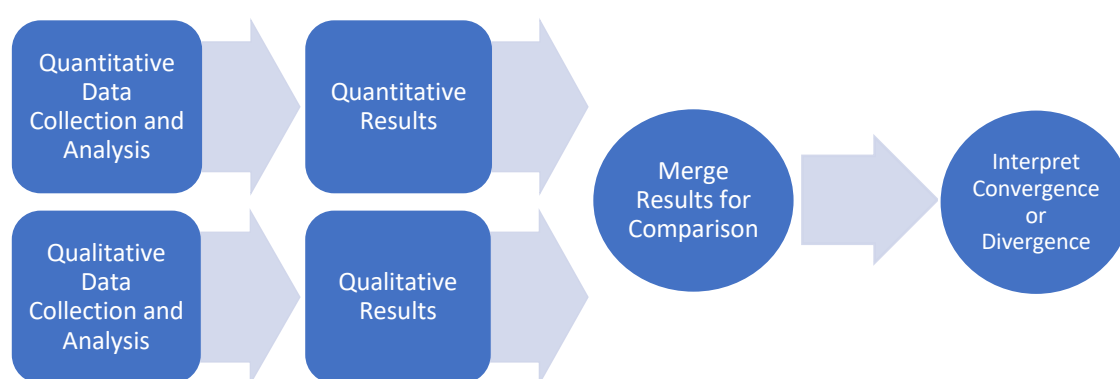
Further, mixed method research is beneficial due to its cumulative analysis allowing for two different perspectives producing a more comprehensive view. Creswell (2015, pp.2, 15) clarified,

²⁹⁵ CRESWELL, J. W. 2015. *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research*, Thousand Oaks, California, SAGE Publications, Inc.

...When an investigator combines statistical trends (quantitative data) with stores and personal experiences (qualitative data), this collective strength provides a better understanding of the research problem than either form of the data alone.²⁹⁶

Within this mixed-method study, a convergent design (Creswell, 2015) was used, collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data separately and then merged for analysis and interpretation.

Figure 33. Mixed-Method Convergent Design Diagram



Triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data was conducted in order to evaluate similarities and differences in outcomes and patterns. Quantitative Quadrants were utilized for analysis in order to allow for statistical comparison with Qualitative Quadrants. An analysis was conducted at isolated Atheist, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages as well as across stages using SPSS through quadrant analysis.

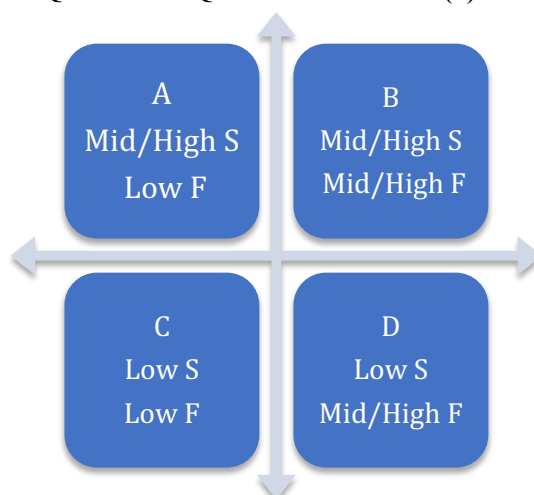
8.4.1. Substance/Function Quadrants – Quantitative results - Isolated Stages

Substance/Function Quadrants were developed reflecting presence and level of Substance and/or Function at the Atheism, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages of belief for survey and interview data analysis. Each quadrant represented levels of Substance and Function as determined by the number of positive responses for each respective stage. ‘Mid/high’ levels of Substance and/or Function were determined as a point notably influential in each respective stage. Initial analysis using a binary low/high division was attempted using 50/50 split. However, the results were grossly indeterminate, providing no

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

revealing trends. A subsequent 30/70 split provided a clearer indication of endorsement patterns, giving allowance for the possibility of a lower number of weighty influences to be of account rather than sole reliance upon a high number of influences. Therefore, a lower threshold of Functional and/or Substantive motivators was recognized as yielding positive effect towards belief formation and change.²⁹⁷

Figure 34. Quantitative Quadrant: Substance (S) Function (F)



Quantitative Quadrant analysis was performed to determine the number of subjects whose responses classified them in either mid/high Substance Quadrants (A = mid/high Substance + low Function or B = mid/high Substance + mid/high Function) or low Substance Quadrants (C = low Substance + low Function or D = low Substance + mid/high Function). Scoring in mid/high Substance Quadrants indicated a positive influence on belief²⁹⁸ as influential at each respective time point, with or without Function variable. Level of

²⁹⁷ Quantitative Quadrant Instructions per stage were as follows: Atheist Stage: Substance = SI (8) + SE (2) = 10; Maximum single response = 10; Function = 17; Maximum single response = 11.) (Quadrant A (Mid/High S; Low F) = Mid/High S = $\geq 30\%$ (3-10); Low F = $< 30\%$ (0-3) (Quadrant B (Mid/High S; Mid/High F) = Mid/High S = $\geq 30\%$ (3-10); Mid/High F = $\geq 30\%$ (4-11) (Quadrant C (Low S; Low F) = Low S = $< 30\%$ (0-2); Low F = $< 30\%$ (0-3) (Quadrant D (Low S; Mid/High F) = Low S = $< 30\%$ (0-2); Mid/High F = $> 30\%$ (4-11);

Catalyst Stage: Substance = SI (6) + SE (4) = 10; Maximum single response = 6.; Function = 15; Maximum single response = 7) (Quadrant A (Mid/High S; Low F) = Mid/High S = $\geq 30\%$ (2-6); Low F = $< 30\%$ (0-2) (Quadrant B (Mid/High S; Mid/High F) = Mid/High S = $\geq 30\%$ (2-6); Mid/High F = $\geq 30\%$ (3-7) (Quadrant C (Low S; Low F) = Low S = $< 30\%$ (0-1); Low F = $< 30\%$ (0-2) (Quadrant D (Low S; Mid/High F) = Low S = $< 30\%$ (0-1); Mid/High F = $> 30\%$ (3-7); and,

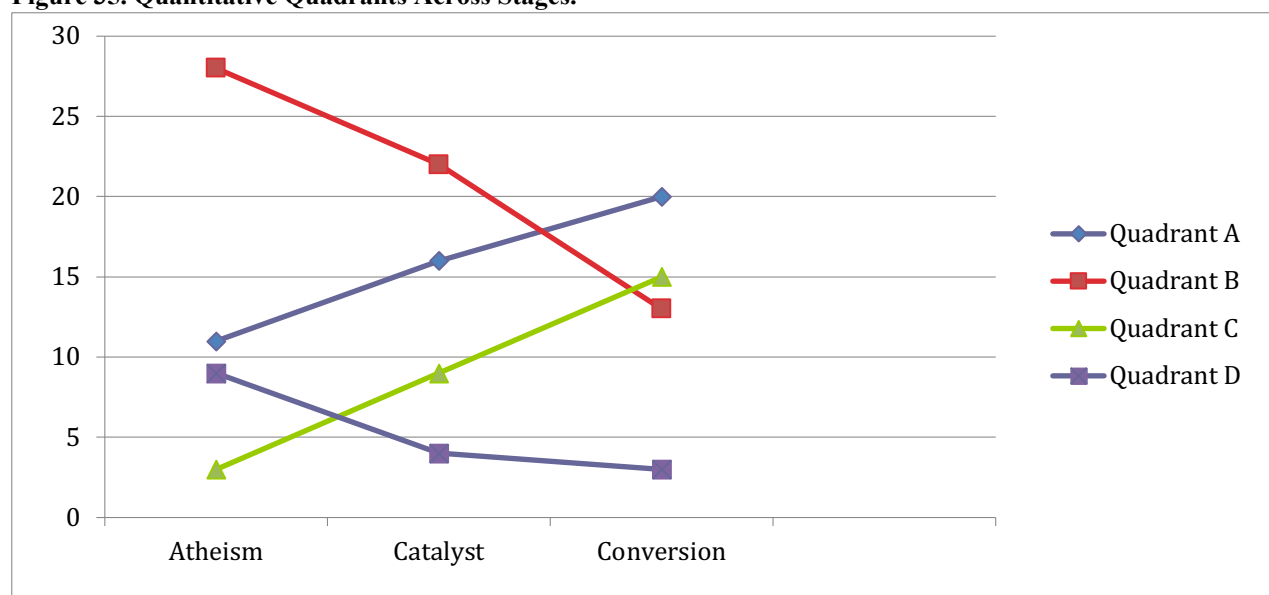
Conversion Stage: Substance = SI (10) + SE (4) = 14; Maximum single response = 13.; Function = 11; Maximum single response = 8.) (Quadrant A (Mid/High S; Low F) = Mid/High S = $\geq 30\%$ (4-13); Low F = $< 30\%$ (0-2) (Quadrant B (Mid/High S; Mid/High F) = Mid/High S = $\geq 30\%$ (4-13); Mid/High F = $\geq 30\%$ (3-8) (Quadrant C (Low S; Low F) = Low S = $< 30\%$ (0-3); Low F = $< 30\%$ (0-2) (Quadrant D (Low S; Mid/High F) = Low S = $< 30\%$ (0-3); Mid/High F = $> 30\%$ (3-8).

²⁹⁸ Substance of belief includes individual affirmation and/or rejection of the reality of God as instrumental in belief formation.

Functional influence was also included in this analysis for comparison. Quantitative Quadrant results are reflected in Figure 20.

Quantitative Quadrant analysis revealed mid/high Substance + mid/high Function (Quadrant B) as the most prominent pattern at both Atheism and Catalyst Stages, dropping to third in prevalence at the Conversion Stage. Mid/high Substance + low Function (Quadrant A) increased from second most prevalent at Atheism and Catalyst Stages to primary position at Conversion Stage. Mid/high Substance + low Function (Quadrant A) increased from second most prevalent at Atheism and Catalyst Stages to primary position at Conversion Stage. The notable presence of mid/high Substance Quadrants A & B strongly suggested Substance plays not only a viable but important role in the holding and changing of worldviews in religious conversion. While mid/high Function participated as integrative, quantitative analysis confirmed Substance as more substantial than Functional influences.

Figure 35. Quantitative Quadrants Across Stages.²⁹⁹



Quadrant A (mid/high Substance / low Function) (Quadrant B (mid/high Substance / mid/high Function)
 Quadrant C (low Substance / low Function) (Quadrant D (low Substance / mid/high Function)

Mid/high Function motivations decreased across three time stages from Atheism to Catalyst to Conversion, as reflected in the downward course of Quadrants B and D; and, reinforced the present but reduced influence of Function through the conversion process. Substance increased as Function decreased; however, mid/high Function remained an integrative component of conversion along with mid/high Substance as seen in Quadrant B.

²⁹⁹ The Y axis indicates number of subjects per Quadrants A, B, C or D; and, the X axis indicates quadrants over three time points.

Of interest, however, was the increased prevalence of Quadrant C (low Function + low Substance) in this analysis over the three time points. This counter-intuitive finding highlighted a limitation in the study, suggesting low identifiable motivations towards conversion. However, lower numbers of Substance and/or Function influencers do not necessarily account for the considerable role of a single or small number of influences play in prompting large personal paradigm shifts. Further, this finding did not undermine the distinct pattern observed suggesting the evidential role of Substance in religious conversion.

8.4.1.1. Quadrants – Quantitative by Qualitative, Atheist Stage

For comparison of mixed-method research data, quantitative (survey) quadrant results were compared with qualitative (interview) quadrant results through cross-tabulation at three time points (e.g., Atheist, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages).

Table 26. Atheist Stage Quadrants, Quantitative and Qualitative Crosstabs.

Atheism Qualitative Quadrant * Atheist Quadrant Crosstabulation						
		Atheist Quantitative Quadrant				Total
		A	B	C	D	
Atheism Qualitative Quadrant	A	3	1	0	0	4
	B	6	21	1	2	30
	D	2	6	2	6	16
Total		11	28	3	8	50

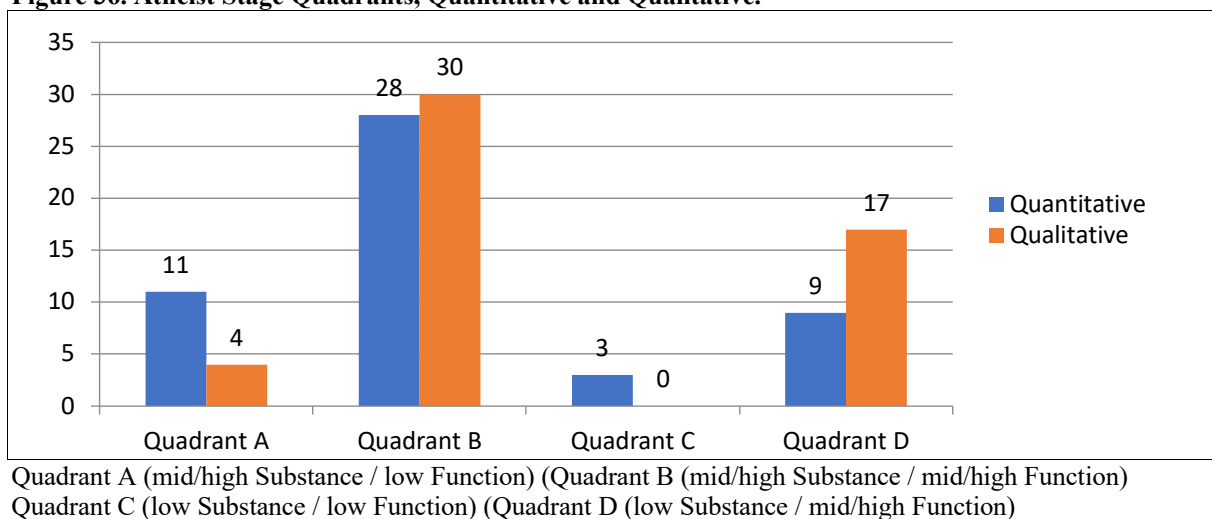
green = mid/high Substance

At the Atheist Stage, the dominant pattern for belief motivation was Quadrant B (mid/high S + mid/high F) with 28/50 (56.0%) quantitative, comparable with 30/50 (60.0%) qualitative measures. Strong Substance motivation via rational justification for disbelief (Quadrants A & B) served as a comparable adjunct motivation along with strong Function components (Quadrants B & D) towards Atheism in both measures for at least half of the subjects tested.³⁰⁰ Results at the Atheist Stage showed Quadrant A (mid/high Substance + low Function) as a notable pattern for eleven (11) more subjects in quantitative analysis (totaling 39/50; 78.0%) and four (4) more subjects in qualitative testing (totaling 34/50;

³⁰⁰ All but seven (7) subjects in the quantitative method and all but nine (9) subjects in the qualitative method assigned them in Quadrant B rather than to one of the other groups.

66.66%).³⁰¹ Both quantitative and qualitative analysis agreed the dominant pattern informing Atheism included mid/high Substance (Quadrants A + B), three-quarters and two-thirds of subjects. The bar graph (below) demonstrates Quantitative (survey) Quadrants A and B (both mid/high Substance) as prominent patterns at the Atheist Stage: Results also suggest mid/high Function (Quadrants B + D) as contributive at the Atheist Stage; low Substance Quadrants C (low Function) and/or D (mid/high Function) yielded the minority pattern in both Quantitative Quadrants (C = 3/50; 5.89%; D = 9/50; 18.0%) and Qualitative Quadrants (C = 0/50; 0.00%; D = 17/50; 34.0%). Elevation of Quadrant D (low Substance + mid/high Function) in qualitative over quantitative analysis may have been due to the expansive nature of inquiry within the interview process.

Figure 36. Atheist Stage Quadrants, Quantitative and Qualitative.



Thus, results yielded general agreement between both quantitative and qualitative quadrant measures at the Atheist Stage. Notable presence of Substance along with Function was found in formation and sustaining of Atheistic beliefs for the majority of subjects.

8.4.1.2. Quadrants – Quantitative by Qualitative, Catalyst Stage

At the Catalyst Stage, cross-tabulation between quantitative survey and qualitative interview analysis resulted in variable patterns for mid/high Substance Quadrants A & B and mid/high Function Quadrants B & D. Quantitative assessment yielded a total of 38/50

³⁰¹ All but one (1) subject were the same for each method. However, the quantitative quadrant analysis picked up 8 more people that the qualitative had assigned mainly to Quadrant B, with two to Quadrant D.

(74.50%) with mid/high Substance Quadrants A (+ high Function - 16/50; 31.32%) or B (+ low Function - 22/50; 44.0%). Low Substance Quadrants C (low Function + low Substance) and D (mid/high Function + low Substance) generated a pattern for a minority of respondents (9/50; 18.0%; and, 4/50; 7.85%, respectively). This Quantitative Quadrant analysis suggested Substance as a primary catalytic component towards openness in considering an alternative worldview perspective, particularly theism and/or Christianity.

However, Qualitative Quadrant analysis produced a markedly different result. Mid/high Substance Quadrants yielded a total of only 13/50 (26.0%) with mid/high Substance Quadrants A (4/50; 8.0%) or B (9/50; 18.0%). Low Substance Quadrant D (mid/high Function + low Substance) resulted as clear dominating pattern (36/50; 70.58%), with Quadrant C (low Function + low Substance) capturing the pattern of a small minority of respondents (2/50; 4.0%). Qualitative Quadrant analysis suggested Function as the primary catalytic component towards belief change.

Table 27. Catalyst Stage Quadrants, Quantitative and Qualitative Cross-Tabs.

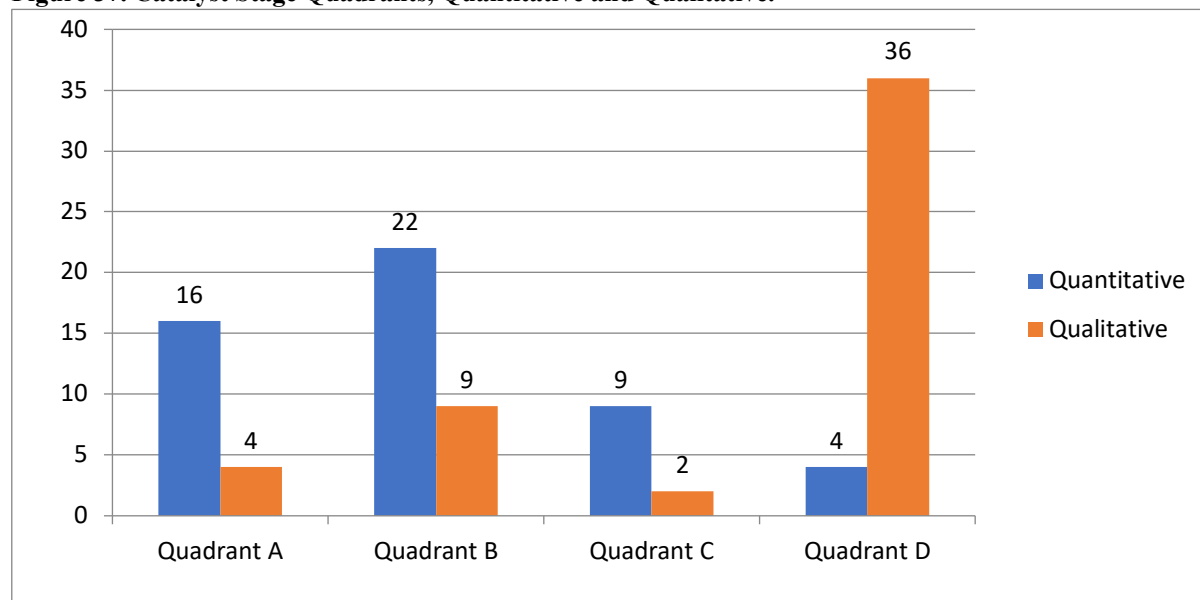
Catalyst Qualitative Quadrant * Catalyst Quadrant Crosstabulation						
		Catalyst Quantitative Quadrant				Total
		A	B	C	D	
Catalyst Qualitative Quadrant	A	1	2	1	0	4
	B	4	5	0	0	9
	C	0	0	2	0	2
	D	10	15	6	4	35
Total		15	22	9	4	50

green = mid/high Substance

The bar graph below demonstrates Quantitative (survey) Quadrants A and B (both mid/high Substance) with prominence at the Catalyst Stage. However, Qualitative analysis demonstrated the prominent role Function played in precipitating openness towards changing beliefs (Quadrants B and D). Both quantitative and qualitative measures suggest the presence of Substance at the Catalyst Stage. However, quantitative survey results affirmed mid/high Substance as a primary motivator for three-quarters of subjects (74.50%), including mid/high Function for approximately one-third of participants (32.31%). Conversely, qualitative interview measures demonstrated a nearly opposite finding with mid/high Function as the

primary catalyst towards openness and change (Quadrants B (9/50) + D (36/50) = 45/50 (90.0%). Approximately one quarter thirteen (13) subjects demonstrated mid/high Substance (26.0%) at the Catalyst Stage; nine (9) were also high Function (18.0%).

Figure 37. Catalyst Stage Quadrants, Quantitative and Qualitative.



Quadrant A (mid/high Substance / low Function) (Quadrant B (mid/high Substance / mid/high Function)
 Quadrant C (low Substance / low Function) (Quadrant D (low Substance / mid/high Function)

This discrepancy in the findings may be best explained through the in-depth nature of the interview process. Whereas the survey provides a variety of pre-determined Substance and Function responses to inquiry, the semi-structured interview allowed for laterality in exploring subtleties in motivations and influences not initially considered by the respondent in the survey. Breaking down pre-established and/or fixed worldviews, particularly in individuals with high levels of resistance to change, is oftentimes accomplished through a variety of influences, both rational and non-rational. During the interview process, some respondents reported that the survey encouraged consideration of obvious or non-obvious catalysts (perhaps not afore pondered) producing a change in their willingness to consider a religious perspective. The interviewer attempted to facilitate reflection upon and an acknowledgement of a balanced array of both Function and Substance motivations effecting change; therefore, the qualitative measure captured, perhaps, a more comprehensive view allowing for a fuller presence of Function-based motivations in addition to Substance at the

Catalyst Stage.³⁰² Specific question selection in the quantitative analysis was not held to be causative in the discrepancy between quantitative and qualitative findings due to the intentional balance available for Function and/or Substance endorsements available in each selected question. Further, the dominance of Function at the Catalyst Stage as found in the interview analysis countered research bias or any intentionality towards promoting Substance indiscriminately.

8.4.1.3. Quadrants – Quantitative by Qualitative, Conversion Stage

Cross-tabulation of Qualitative and Quantitative Quadrants at the Conversion Stage yielded the following results:

Table 28. Conversion Stage Quadrants, Quantitative and Qualitative Cross-Tabs

Conversion Qualitative Quadrant * ConversionQuantitative Quadrant Crosstabulation						
		Conversion Quantitative Quadrant				Total
		A	B	C	D	
Conversion Qualitative Quadrant	A	8	4	7	1	20
	B	12	6	8	2	28
	D	0	2	0	0	2
Total		20	12	15	3	50

green = mid/high Substance

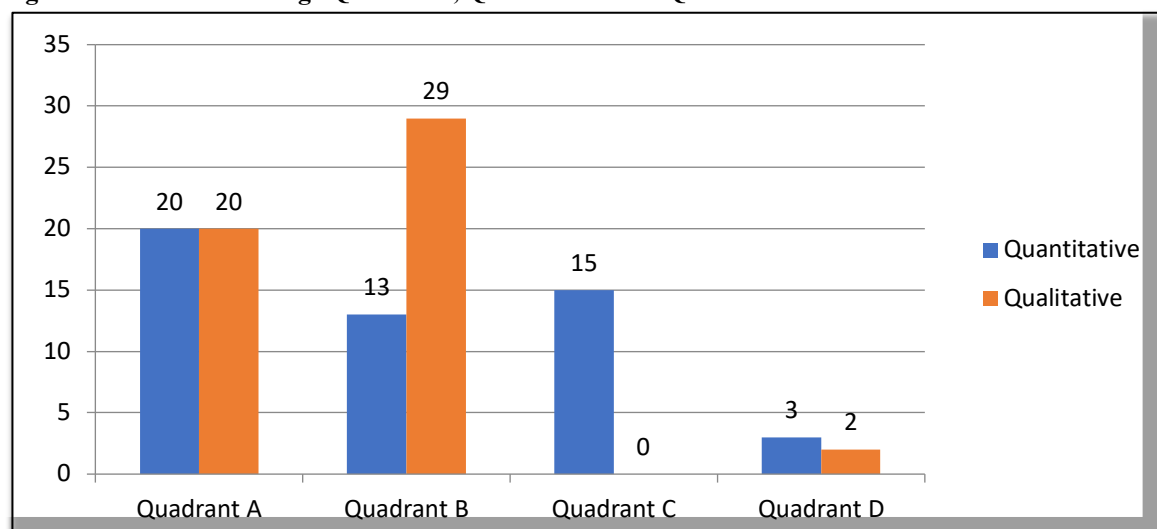
Quantitative survey results confirmed mid/high Substance motivators as contributing towards conversion for two-thirds of respondents (33/50 or 66.0%): Quadrant A (20/50; 40.0%) + Quadrant B (13/50; 26.0%). Low Substance Quadrants comprised 18/50 or 36.0% of responses (Quadrant C 15/50; 30.0% + Quadrant D 3/50; 6.0%).

The bar graph demonstrates Quantitative (survey) Quadrants A and B (both mid/high Substance) with continued prominence at the Conversion Stage along with the concurrent elevation of Quadrant C (low Substance, low Function), also observed on the prior-reported repeated ANOVA measures. Mid/high Function contributed to conversion for approximately one-third of respondents (16/50 or 31.32%: Quadrant B (13/50; 26.0%) + Quadrant D (3/50; 6.0%). Comparatively, qualitative interview measures at the Conversion Stage demonstrated

³⁰² Descriptive Quantitative Analysis of surveys revealed functional social, experiential, emotional, and existential components influential in moving towards consideration of God's existence, including a change in intentional willingness to 'become open.' However, Descriptive Qualitative Analysis of interviews confirmed an expressly dominant role played by Functional influences in the lives of the subjects.

an even stronger presence of Substance as weighed against quantitative findings. Mid/high Substance Quadrants constituted a strong presence for a majority of respondents (49/50 or 96.01%) (Quadrant A (20/50; 40.0%) + Quadrant B (29/50; 58.0%).

Figure 38. Conversion Stage Quadrants, Quantitative and Qualitative.



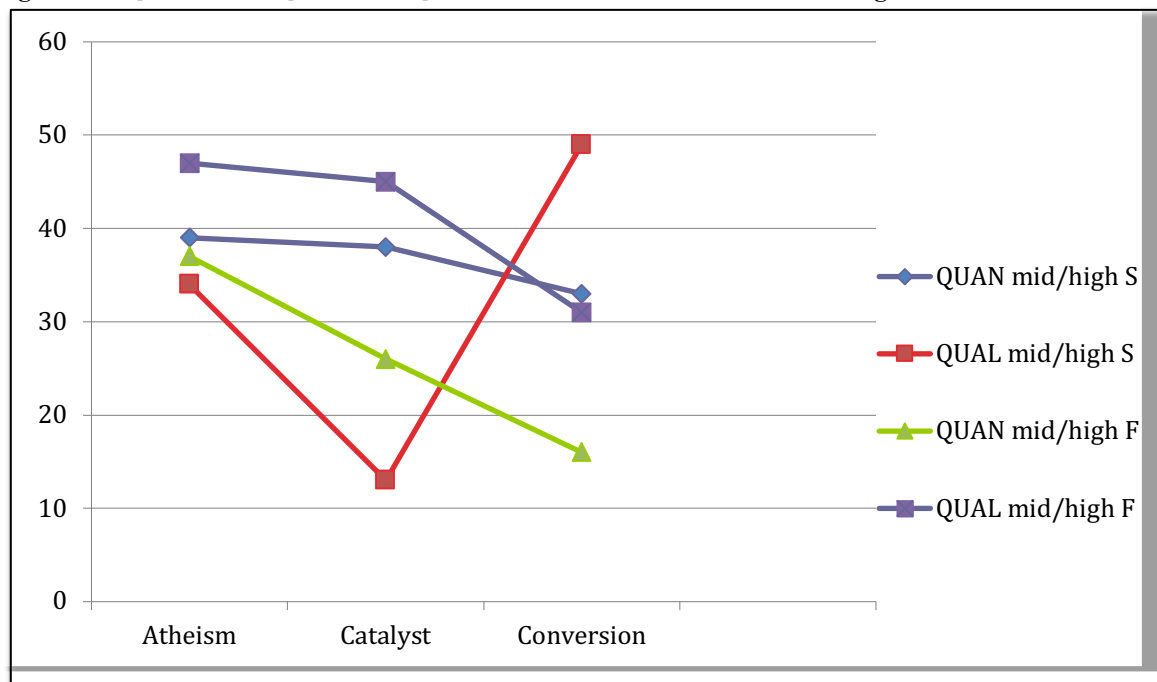
Quadrant A (mid/high Substance / low Function) (Quadrant B (mid/high Substance / mid/high Function)
 Quadrant C (low Substance / low Function) (Quadrant D (low Substance / mid/high Function)

Qualitative analysis strongly confirmed the elevated role Substance played as compared to Function at the Conversion Stage. Qualitative Quadrant analysis confirmed a substantial elevation in presence of mid/high Substance at the Conversion Stage for all but two respondents; and, mid/high Function continued to play a strong viable but secondary role for two-thirds of respondents. Low Substance Quadrants consisted of only two (2) subjects (4.0% in Quadrant D and none in Quadrant C. Additionally, mid/high Function Quadrants on qualitative analysis also yielded noteworthy presence for nearly two-thirds of subjects (31/50 or 62%) (Quadrant B 29/50; 58.0% + Quadrant D 2/50; 4.0%).

8.4.2. Quadrants – Quantitative by Qualitative, Across Stages

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the presence or absence of Substance as a meaningful contributor Atheists' religious conversion to Christianity, particularly as relative to Function motivations. Both quantitative and qualitative quadrant analyses confirmed a positive role for Substance of belief in the conversion process, allowing for variance of import at different stages.

Figure 39. Quantitative/Qualitative Quadrant Cross-Tab Results: Across Stages.³⁰³



For Quantitative Quadrant analyses, mid/high Substance occurred most prominently at the Conversion Stage, whether assessed through survey or interview measures. Substance also contributed to belief formation and justification at the Atheist Stage (quantitative and qualitative) as well as precipitating openness to change at the Catalyst Stage (quantitative alone). Conversely, Qualitative Quadrant analysis resulted in a marked decrease in Substance and increase in Function at the Catalyst Stage. Likewise, Functional motivations fueled beliefs at all three stages. Despite variance between quantitative and qualitative analyses, particularly at the Catalyst Stage, both measures confirmed the relative decrease in Function influences (with a concurrent increase of Substance) at the Conversion Stage. These findings advocate for increased awareness and openness towards the inherent presence of Substance in consideration of religious conversion and the integration of Function and Substance in belief formation and change.

³⁰³ QUAN high S = Quadrant A + Quadrant B, quantitative quadrant analysis) (QUAL high S = Quadrant A + Quadrant B, qualitative quadrant analysis) (QUAN high F = Quadrant B + Quadrant D, quantitative quadrant analysis) (QUAL high F = Quadrant B + Quadrant D, qualitative quadrant analysis) (Quadrant A (mid/high Substance / low Function) (Quadrant B (mid/high Substance / mid/high Function) (Quadrant C (low Substance / low Function) (Quadrant D (low Substance / mid/high Function)).

8.5. Conclusion – Substance Confirmed as Substantial for Conversion

The presence and role of Substance and Function during three stages (i.e., Atheism, Catalyst, and Conversion) were assessed using quantitative analysis based upon fifty-one subjects' responses to an online SoGoSurvey. Inferential analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS software version 23. Repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted measuring the percentage of Substance and/or Function endorsements. Findings confirmed the presence of Substance at across stages without significant difference; however, for Function, significance across time points was observed. Subsequent T-Test confirmed significant lowered percentage of Function at the Conversion Stage. Comparison of Substance and Function over three time points through repeated-measures ANOVA confirmed no significant difference at the Atheism and Catalyst Stages; however, the presence of Substance over Function was observed at the Conversion Stage. Frequency analysis revealed rough equivalence of Substance and Function at the Atheism and Catalyst Stages; however, Substance scores dominated over Function scores at the Conversion Stage, an increased mean of .25. These patterns demonstrate the dual influence of Substance and Function during the first two stages of Atheism and Catalyst; however, with significant increase in Substance influence at the Conversion Stage throughout these measures.

Comparison of Substance measures Substance Intellectual (SI) and Spiritual Experiential (SE) was conducted using a Paired-sample T-Test at three stages. Significant difference was found at the Atheist Stage, the SI average higher than SE. However, no significance was found at either the Catalyst or Conversion Stages.

Six demographic variables were tested to determine the correlation of Substance and/or Function during Atheism, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages. The variables included biological sex, education, geographical location, age at the time of the survey, strength of Atheism, and years post-conversion. Pearson Correlation analysis determined no significant relationship between biological sex, geographical location, education, and strength of Atheism with Substance scores; however, a moderate negative correlation was found for age,

reaching significance at each stage (slightly weaker at the Catalyst Stage). Findings suggest younger people endorse more items on Substance whereas older people endorse fewer; and, Function plays a slightly more influential role at the Catalyst Stage than does Substance. ‘Years post-conversion’ similarly reached significance as did age. Pearson Correlation test confirmed very high correlation in the relationship between age and years post-conversion, similar to elevated Substance endorsements for younger than older people. Pearson Correlation testing confirmed no significant relationship between any of the six demographic variables and Function scores at any of the three time points.

Mixed-method research allowed for triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative Quadrant analysis was conducted in order to compare data with Qualitative Quadrant analysis. Each quadrant represented either low and/or mid/high levels of Substance and Function as determined by the number of positive responses for Atheism, Catalyst, and Conversion Stages. Scoring in mid/high Substance Quadrants indicated a positive influence on belief as influential at each respective time point; similarly, scoring mid/high Function Quadrants indicated a positive influence on belief. Quantitative Quadrant analysis revealed mid/high Substance quadrants as influential in all three stages, as primary at the Conversion Stage simultaneous with a notable decline in Function. The reduction of mid/high Functional motivations across three-time stages from Atheism to Catalyst to Conversion reinforces the present but the reduced influence of Function (as relative to Substance) through the conversion process. The importance of Substance of belief becomes greater as Function lessens.

Variance between measures at the Catalyst Stage suggests heightened Substance influence with quantitative analysis versus heightened Function influence with qualitative analysis. Regardless, at the Conversion Stage, both measures cohered towards a notably similar patterning demonstrating high levels of Substance as a critical component towards the religious conversion of Atheists to Christianity. These findings affirmed the presence and positive influence of Substance of belief, particularly in the religious Conversion Stage.

9.0. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS FINDINGS

9.1. Narrative Analysis according to the Religious Conversion Analysis Model

This chapter addresses thesis question B2, narrative analysis of religious conversion conducted on a sample group of twenty-three subjects. The proposed Narrative Analysis Model for Religious Conversion was used to consider the stories of religious conversion from Atheism to Christianity using the framework of Pre-Conversion Meta-Narrative (Atheist Stage), Changing Meta-Narrative (Catalyst Stage), Conversion Narrative (Conversion Stage), and Post-Conversion Meta-Narrative (Post-Conversion Stage).

In order to provide the structure of narrative analysis within this context, the Christian meta-narrative is reviewed first. Once this basic narrative framework is established, specific areas of biographical reconstruction are discussed including canonical text, Function influences: context and community, identity, experience, emotional sense-making, purpose and meaning, personal will and desire, as well as Substance influences: intellectual sense-making and spiritual reality. Examples of one convert's integrated narrative memo, reflexive commentary, biographical reconstruction, and visual chart representation are included in the Appendix for reference.

Narrative analysis of religious conversion narratives in this research will determine 1) whether and how biographical reconstruction occurs through religious conversion as converts change from personal embodiment of pre-conversion meta-narrative to post-conversion narrative, 2) the relationship, if any, between the converts' believed meta-narrative story and their individual embodied story, 3) the presence and/or integrated nature of Substance and Function variables in the conversion process, and 4) whether these narrative analysis findings cohere with prior mixed-method data analysis in this study. Discussion regarding findings and the integrative nature of conversion concludes the chapter.

9.2. Christian Meta-Narrative and Conversion Narrative Analysis

The Judeo-Christian bible, from Genesis to Revelation³⁰⁴, frames the meta-narrative for the Christian community as well as individual religious conversion stories. In order to provide context for narrative analysis of religious conversion from Atheism to Christianity, the first task is to understand the larger story converts come to believe and embody. The canonical text, the Bible, gives the basic story its shape and lays the foundation in which to consider biographical reconstruction in religious conversion stories. For Stonestreet and Kunkle (2017), the Christian meta-narrative includes four chronicled chapters - Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. The Creation narrative establishes a monotheistic triune God as transcendent, sovereign creator of heaven, earth and humanity as good and purposed towards flourishing. God is also a personal being, immanent in creation and in his relationship with those whom he had created. The Fall narrative describes entry of evil, sin and death into the world causing disorder and brokenness between God and humanity, humanity and the universe, humans with one another, as well as within each person as seen throughout human history. The nation of Israel was created as 'God's people' through which all people are restored to right relationship with God.

The Redemption narrative tells how brokenness is remedied through the person and work of Jesus Christ - God who came into the world in the form of a man.³⁰⁵ Unlike all of humanity, he was perfectly righteous and obedient, without sin. He gave himself up as a sacrifice on the cross to take on the sin, guilt, and punishment of the world, dying a criminal's death even though he himself was innocent. Jesus ultimately conquered sin and death by rising from the grave, verifying his resurrection through multiple appearances to over five hundred people over forty days. According to the biblical text, any person who admits their guilt of sin and personal offense against God, repents, and accepts Jesus's act of

³⁰⁴ Although the New Testament scripture is considered to be distinctly Christian, the Old Testament provides the groundwork for the coming of Jesus and the beginning of Christianity as well as ongoing relevance as 'the Word of God'.

³⁰⁵ The Trinitarian conception of God (one essence/being with three persons – Father, Son (Jesus Christ), and Holy Spirit) allows for the person of Jesus to come to earth, the 'Word (logos) made flesh'. Christian doctrine conceptually supports understanding of the incarnate Jesus as 'fully God' and 'fully man'.

self-sacrifice for sin on their behalf is given pardon and righteousness, their brokenness and separation from God reconciled. This is the Christian gospel (good news) story. New converts find their community in the church, established to continue God's purposes until Jesus returns. Finally, the Christian story climaxes in Restoration when all things on heaven and earth are made new, and all who are 'in Christ' find intimate eternal dwelling with God in an abundant life freed from brokenness and pain. For Goldberg (2001), the Christian story is one of a broken world reconciled to God and given new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the self-sacrifice for the sins of all people. Within the context of the biblical narrative, Christian faith, ethics and life all center on the story of Jesus Christ. His biographies reveal not only his character but are descriptive of and prescriptive toward humanity's character as well. That is, those who read the biblical narrative 'find themselves' in the story through reflection and self-discovery. The primacy of Jesus within the biblical narrative gives the whole story its shape, forming the way Christian communities and the converts see Jesus as central in their lives. The person and revelation of Jesus makes all other events, before and after, intelligible.

The larger Christian meta-narrative and the centrality of Jesus give shape to the smaller personal Christian conversion story. Fackre (2001, 195-199) sees evangelical narrative as 'the linkage of the Christian Story to the believer's story through biblical stories. It is the Christian faith lived at the juncture of personal, ecclesial, and biblical narrative'. An individual's conversion story finds its personal context as relating to individual biblical stories and communal, historical context within the larger overarching central 'great story'. Narratives of self, community, and canon are uniquely composed yet held in tension to one another. Within the Judeo-Christian context, order is not based upon a self-created narrative into which the larger story is developed, but rather the larger story informing and constituting the smaller community and individual narratives. Fackre explains (2001, p. 195), 'the Christian narrative has to do first and foremost with the God Story and is held firmly in relationship to what God did, is doing, and will do'. In his view, conversion narrative

functions as a way of preserving the integrity of both the biblical source as well as the community itself. Both church and individual believers actively embody and carry forward a historically unfolding drama of Christianity through ongoing confessions, creeds, liturgy and traditions. He summarizes (2001, p. 199), ‘A Christian story worth telling is an encompassing one that rises out of Scripture’s intentions as interpreted and lived out by a faithful church and personally appropriated by the believer’.

Within the larger Christian meta-narrative, conversion stories weave a sense of the smaller, personal nature of salvation. The larger story not only frames individual stories but holds in constant view continual life transformation during and long after conversion occurs. Religious converts begin to perceive and embody aspects of Creation (understanding where we came from), Fall (understanding where we are), Redemption (understanding what we have become), and Restoration (understanding what we are becoming and will become) in their own lives. They see themselves as connected to the larger story of God and his movement throughout history, the Bible, and the church community. As study participant Joseph remarks, ‘I see myself as part of a story and part of God’s story’. In order to envision the larger metanarrative (Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration) as applied to an individual conversion narrative, here is Joseph’s self-written conversion story:

Table 29. Christian Metanarrative applied to Individual Conversion Narrative

S3 27yo male US Atheism: 13 Conversion: 17 Yrs since RC: 10	PRE-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE	CHANGING META-NARRATIVE	CONVERSION NARRATIVE	POST-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE
	[Creation] Atheist Stage	[Fall] Catalyst Stage	[Redemption] Conversion Stage	[Restoration] Post-Conversion Stage
S3 #37 Jeremy Narrative Embodied Emic Perspective [survey story]	Q32. Please provide a brief summary of your conversion from Atheism to Christianity. PRE-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE [Creation – understanding where we came from] I was captain of the debate team and editor-in-chief of the newspaper in high school, so I thought I was pretty bright compared to most people. I was a bit of a loner, so I spent most of my time at lunch breaks reading philosophy. By the time I was 14, I was not only an Atheist, but an existential nihilist. CATALYST [Fall – understanding where we are]			

	<p>After a chance meeting with a philosopher of science and Christian missionary, I ended up studying philosophy in a more immersive sort of way. I soon realized I couldn't clearly articulate my world view and that I had a lot of holes I needed to fill. However, I was still openly hostile to religious claims and so I set out to disprove every major world religion, so I would always have an articulate answer to 'why don't you believe (fill in the blank).'</p> <p>CONVERSION [Redemption – understanding what we have become]</p> <p>After nearly two years of painstaking, meticulous research I had to submit to the fact that Christian theism represented the most coherent, viable, and powerful world view. I despised this conclusion initially, and I often joke that I 'became a Christian kicking and screaming'. Those two years of research were exhausting both academically and emotionally. I soon realized that my project would fail if I was not taking an objective look at things, so I constantly reminded myself not to demonstrate God's non-existence nor to confirm his possible existence, but to simply keep myself truly open minded to truth.</p> <p>POST-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE [Restoration – understanding what we are becoming / will become]</p> <p>My Atheism was hardened by my own arrogance that I needed someone who was able to respectfully go toe-to-toe with me. I also needed to have someone in my real life (not just in books or online) that I could bounce questions off of. Arguments can indeed shape a worldview, but that's only true if someone is in a state of mind where truth is valued above all other things. For me, that required really having someone to process life with instead of someone just to process ideas with. I was nearly 16 before I met educated, articulate, Christians that cherished dialogue instead of running from it.</p> <p>I had heard the hellfire and brimstone version of Christianity from openly hostile street preachers for a long time, but I remember being really angry and thinking 'Why on earth has no one ever told me this?!' <i>when I first understood the full, big-picture narrative arch of Christianity and what it might mean for my life.</i> I suppose what this means practically for the contemporary church is that we need to focus on not only equipping people to articulate and defend Christian theism, but we also need to be fostering open relationships with skeptical people.</p> <p>It's too easy to view people as nothing more than a collective set of arguments that must be defeated instead of another human being that is deeply longing to understand their world just like we are.</p>
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Within any conversion story, transformation occurs over time. Shifts in identity, sense-making, as well as purpose and meaning transpire as biographical reconstruction takes place. Jeremy's story demonstrates change in his sense of self-identity, emotional attitudes, beliefs, purposes, and ways of living. His interview narrative gives insight into other factors such as context and community, volitional will towards change, and spiritual influence. These dynamics are analyzed across Jeremy's and other conversion narrative samples in this study. This chapter explores a sample group of 23 conversion narratives– examining various changes across time as identified in the proposed Religious Conversion Narrative Analysis

Approach to provide insight into biographical reconstruction experienced through conversion. Narrative examples of biographical reconstruction for each area addressed in this chapter are located in the Appendix.

9.2.1. Canonical Text

As established, the Christian canonical text, the Bible, provides the meta-narrative framework through which converts understand their conversions. Prior to conversion, Atheists typically view the Christian story as unfamiliar, irrelevant, untrue, and/or unattractive based upon survey research in this thesis. Through conversion, they move from standing apart from the Christian story to seeing themselves as part of the canonical story - not only in personal identity, value, purposes, and salvation but also in the meta-narrative and salvific purposes of God through the church (Redemption, Restoration).

Table 30. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts– Canonical Text

Canonical Text	BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION – Canonical Text
	<p>☐ ⊗ ‘Reading the text’ to ‘Text reading me’ shift: Movement from reading the text as a source of information to determine its truth to seeing the bible as a credible source requiring personal response and transformation.</p> <p>And</p> <p>☐ ⊗ ‘Outside the text’ to ‘Inside the text’ shift: Movement from distinctly standing apart from the Christian worldview and biblical text to seeing self as part of the canonical story - not only in personal identity, value, purposes, and salvation, but also in the grand narrative and salvific purposes of God through the church.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>☐ ⊗ No clear shift in Canonical Text: The bible or other religious texts did not appear to play a remarkable role in the stages of conversion.</p>

Within the sample group, narrative analysis revealed two primary shifts through the conversion process in converts’ view of the Bible. In the first shift, converts move from merely seeing the bible as a source of information and/or to determine its truth to recognizing it as a credible, divine source requiring personal response and transformation.³⁰⁶ Within a biographical reconstruction view, converts shift from ‘reading the text’ to ‘the text reading

³⁰⁶This shift is often preceded by not reading the biblical text at all or reading with intent to disprove biblical contents.

me’. Goldberg (2001) affirms that converts ‘find themselves’ in the biblical story through open reflection and self-discovery.³⁰⁷ Within the Christian story, converts begin to see themselves as personally made by and responsible to a Creator God (Creation), and understand their own brokenness and need for forgiveness (Fall). Through conversion, they see their lives as spiritually reconciled to God, as made new in identity, purpose, and destiny (Redemption). They may identify with particular biblical persons and circumstances in their own conversion story. Following conversion, they appreciate their spiritual lives as restored to wholeness and work to embody the Christian life as empowered by the Holy Spirit (Restoration). Secondly, a biographical reconstructive shift occurs when converts change from viewing themselves from ‘outside the text’ to ‘inside the text’. Converts move from distinctly standing apart from the Christian worldview and biblical text to seeing self as part of the canonical story - not only in personal identity, value, purposes, and salvation, but also in the grand narrative and salvific purposes of God through the church. Located in the Appendix are three examples where the converts move from disbelief to finding themselves as part of the larger story of God as well as highly valuing, knowing, connecting with, and living out the Biblical text.³⁰⁸

Within these biographical reconstruction shifts in Canonical Text, several smaller themes arose.³⁰⁹ These themes provide insight as to how the biblical text influenced the Atheists’ movement toward Christian conversion from the pre- to post-metanarrative stages. The most common narrative themes during the Atheist Stage included converts viewing themselves as ‘Outside the [biblical] Text’ through its unfamiliarity, disinterest, rejection, disbelief, and intentional efforts to discredit or disprove the Bible. As an Atheist, Paul perceived the Bible merely as myth, stating, ‘I went in to the bookstore and took all of the

³⁰⁷ GOLDBERG, M. 2001. *Theology and Narrative: a critical introduction*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock Publishers. For Goldberg, the paradigmatic secular story trains us to regard our lives and our bodies as our possessions for which we are ultimately answerable only to ourselves and the purpose of which is to be utilized in the pursuit of self-fulfillment and happiness. It is from this secular story that the convert transforms to find themselves in the Christian story.

³⁰⁸ See Appendix 12.9.1., Canonical Text shift Tables 64 and 65.

³⁰⁹ See Appendix 12.9.1. Canonical Text Narrative Themes, Table 63.

Bibles and put them in the Christian fiction section.’ Atheists typically held to belief in the ‘texts’ of science, reason/logic, Atheistic philosophy, general university, New Atheist writings, and even Satanic literature to uphold their Atheistic viewpoints. However, some respondents became disappointed and disenchanted with their supporting texts when they began to critically examine them. In hindsight, Michelle was drawn to Christian themes through literature, although as an Atheist she had no familiarity with Biblical narrative.³¹⁰

At the Catalyst Stage, respondents began to encounter the canonical/biblical text in different ways, causing them to reconsider their prior perspective. Themes at this phase include hearing and reading the text, studying the text, comparing religious texts, believe the text, or be positively affected by the bible. Towards conversion, potential converts continued not only to read the text and believe the text, but also found the ‘text reading them’ – that the bible seemed to be more than true in its view of the human condition ‘true of them’, but it was also personally ‘true for them’. Within the sample group, Christopher described reading the bible as a spiritual experience, particularly when reading about Jesus.

[You mentioned that you responded to a religious/mystical experience. Did you have a particular experience that occurred over and above your intellectual seeking?]

I guess it was, it wasn’t like a vision or anything like that, but I was really feeling so strongly drawn to the character of Jesus and that was, it hard to explain they discord in my mind, but I was thinking that Christianity is probably true being strongly, supernaturally, powerfully attracted to the person of Jesus but somehow still hating Christianity.

I know it doesn’t make a lot of sense to say these things in concert but that is the discord that was going on in my mind and heart there. *And the spiritual experience is when I would read or think anything about Jesus. And I just remember reading the Bible and literally shaking when I read the gospels because I just could not that there is a person like this, that this person was God, and that this person cared for me.*

As another example, Michelle continued to read Christian storied literature to more fully grasp the deeply sacrificial nature of the Christian story, moving her towards conversion.

³¹⁰ Michelle particularly cited the narratives of *The Narnia Chronicles* by C.S. Lewis and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien.

After conversion, several themes emerged as converts were continuing to know, study and believe the text more deeply, be transformed by the text³¹¹, and embody the text (living ‘inside the text’). Evidence of biographical reconstruction is seen in the converts’ language use demonstrating influence of the bible in speaking from a Christian ‘canonized’ post-conversion perspective. For example, Kyle uses scriptural terms when describing his former life as an Atheist:

To go through waking up and go through the day, reminding myself constantly, ‘You are an Atheist, right? You are an Atheist. Remember you are an Atheist. You’re an Atheist.’ It needed energy in a peculiar kind of way. It is a very strange thing. I knew that the idea was attractive. I really wanted it. *But yet it was and is for all I know was my experiencing with the Bible talks about when it says about suppressing the truth or whatever.* There was an energy drain to it as if you have a big stick and you’re trying to force something away or whatever. So that was unexpected.

John’s post-conversion familiarity with the bible informs the way he ‘sees’ people [a prior girlfriend] in his conversion story, as through a scriptural lens: ‘*She is the woman at the well.*’³¹² She was looking for love, relationships, tried broken marriages, lived an immoral lifestyle, living all over the place.’ As a Christian, Ryan’s understanding of his religious conversion and new perspective is grounded in his post-conversion Christian meta-narrative:

God called us, regenerated us, gave us new hearts and renewed our minds... God was gracious to us. We would do well to remember that. We are not in an elevated position over our Atheist neighbors. *We are in a position of being rescued from being exactly where they were...* We are not rescued because of our own salvation. We should be grateful for that which we have.

And some of my best friends are unfortunately not Christians. *These people are still important. They are image bearers of God. Lord willing, some of them will actually be converted if that is what God wills. These people still matter. They are still important and worthy of respect and dignity.*

³¹¹ Amanda gave an example of how she the bible transforms her life: ‘It has become very transformative in the sense that when I experience pain, especially as related to my sons, their encounters with death and surgeries, you know, they weren’t given very long to live. So, I’m sitting there and I’m thinking, and I start crying and I started praying. What came back to me was the story of Jesus when he is with the Pharisees and they are criticizing his disciples when he is eating and feasting. And he says, “When the bridegroom is with them, of course they are going to be eating and feasting. The bridegroom will be taken away. And when he is taken away, then they will fast and mourn.” And, for some reason that came into my mind and I started praying. I said, “Lord, I don’t want to mourn while he is still alive. I want to rejoice when he is alive because maybe this is all that I can give him right now is my joy.” I looked up from the prayer and the tears stopped and I have never cried thinking of my children’s death since then. When you believe this is actual truth, this is as true as it gets then I believe it has a transformational power that you don’t get if you don’t believe it that deeply.’

³¹² Referencing the Samaritan woman at the well from John 4:4-26.

Ryan's language reflects themes of Creation ('They are image bearers of God...important and worthy of respect and dignity'), Fall ('Some of them will actually be converted' - suggesting a fallen state), Redemption ('We are in a position of being rescued'), Restoration ('God...regenerated us, gave us new hearts and renewed our minds'). Melissa summarizes her conversion by quoting a bible verse, 'For You had cast me into the deep... But You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God –Jonah 2:3,6.' Here, she sees herself 'in the text' as one who has been rescued by God.

9.3. Biographical Reconstruction in Religious Conversion – Functional Influences

Narrative analysis of conversion stories takes account of both Substance and Function aspects influencing religious conversion. Functional elements include external socio-cultural and contextual factors as well as internal, personal variables. As a convert moves through the conversion process, the expectation is that change will occur in some or all of these areas from pre-conversion to post-conversion. The goal of narrative analysis within this context is to see how biographical reconstruction occurs in each area as the convert progresses from a pre- to post-conversion self-understanding. Biographical reconstruction shifts are assessed through the language the converts use to tell their conversion stories. Commonalities are observed between the stories in each respective area and analyzed. Findings for each area of influence follows including Context and Community, Identity, Experience, Emotional Sense-making, Purpose and Meaning, and Personal Will/Desire.

9.3.1. Context and Community

As established in this first portion of this thesis, socio-cultural and community contexts play a dynamic role in the forming and changing of beliefs towards religious conversion. In analyzing the sample group of conversion narratives, each convert fell into one of three primary shifts in context and community in moving from Atheism to Christianity. The primary difference between these shifts is an autonomous versus communal understanding of themselves and their views prior to, during, and following conversion. A convert either 1) maintains a sense of autonomy throughout the conversion process but

changes belief and identity, 2) moves from autonomy during Atheism to community as a Christian, or 3) exchanges communities from Atheist to Christian during conversion. Shifts were determined through language evaluation through stages of conversion:

Table 31. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts - Context and Community

Context & Community	BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION – Context and Community
0/23; 0.0%	<input type="checkbox"/> ⊗ ‘I Atheist’ to ‘I Christian’ shift in moving from autonomous Atheism (non-active in Atheist community) to isolated Christian living (non-active in Christian community). Or <input type="checkbox"/> ⊗ ‘I Atheist’ to ‘We Christians’ shift in moving from autonomous Atheism (non-active in Atheist community) to desire for intentional community with Christians.
12/23; 52.2%	Or
11/23; 47.8%	<input type="checkbox"/> ⊗ ‘We Atheists’ to ‘We Christians’ shift: Movement from personal involvement in or influence from Atheist community to becoming an active part of Christian community.

Language samples highlight biographical reconstruction within context and community. Interim stages are included in order to demonstrate the process of the embodied shift from pre- to post-metanarrative. Narrative analysis revealed none of the converts demonstrated an autonomous movement from Atheism to Christianity. Further, no Atheists described becoming an autonomous Christian, as all converts became involved in church and/or Christian community post-conversion. Half of the sample group (12/23; 52.2%) described an autonomy in their Atheism, moving from independence towards a desire for intentional communion with God and community with Christians following conversion. Half (11/23; 47.8%) associated with a community of Atheists prior to moving into a Christian community. They moved from an immediate community/context whose views and values are contrary to God to becoming a part of the community who supports Christianity, often actively engaged in bringing others to be a part of the community. For instance, Barbara’s narrative revealed her tendency to be drawn to and shaped by community throughout her life – from childhood (nominal Christianity) to university and adult friendships, organizational affiliations and marriage (Atheism), back to Christian church community. Of all of the sample group, her motivations towards community belonging are the strongest. As a

Christian, she voices a deep sense of being in community not only with the church but also with God, stating:

I have also had the privilege of being used by God to begin several major community ministries, with at least one more still on my bucket list! In the last few years, I've mostly worked in church-related ministries and as a public-school volunteer - a GREAT mission field! ...Will ALWAYS continue in my main purpose of building God's Kingdom wherever he assigns me.
(capitalization original to her written survey text)

Within these larger shifts, smaller narrative Context and Community themes from pre- to post-metanarrative are observed in the sample interview stories. These themes are subdivided into 'Culture' as highlighting broader macro-cultural influences and 'Social Community' as recognizing micro-cultural influences, particularly groups with whom the convert directly interacts such as family, friends, and church community.³¹³

Although individual narratives vary, common themes reveal general patterns of cultural and/or social community influence or lack of influence over the course of conversion from Atheism to Christianity. Themes at the Atheist Stage show converts as rejecting Christians and/or Christianity due to negative cultural and/or community messaging, lack of positive exposure to or personal interaction, and/or off-putting experiences with religious institutions and/or religious people, including family. Catalyst narrative themes center on an unexpected encounter or circumstance in which converts' preconceived views of religion and religious people are challenged. In entering a new context or community, converts begin to socially interact and form relationships with those whom they consider 'true' or 'genuine' Christians. These positive connections not only break down prior misconceptions once fueling their rejection of God and faith but replace negative stereotypes with new positive conceptions of religious belief and believers as potentially good, attractive, (or even intelligent) as they witness an informed, embodied faith. For half of the sample, converts become open towards Christianity and church attendance and belonging to a church community. Negative pre-conceptions continue to erode as potential converts perceive that

³¹³ See Appendix 12.9.2. Context and Community Narrative Themes, Table 66.

the authenticity of a Christian group aligns with their newly conceived notions of religious people. They begin to associate with the religious community, attend church services, study the bible and come to believe in God, converting to Christianity. For the other half, conversion occurs prior to attending or belonging to a church community. In those cases, independent search and study may have been prompted by a surprising and/or challenging encounter with an intellectual Christian or a desire to disprove Christianity.

Religious conversion occurs either inside or outside of a supportive faith community or context. In either case, broad cultural influence is diminished during Conversion Stage as converts tended to value belief in Christianity over belonging to an Atheist community or conforming to cultural values. Notable, however, are those who lost their former Atheist community due to a rejection of converts' choice to become a Christian. The finding concurs with Iyadurai's (2011) "Hostilities" conversion phase. Their narratives shifted from an agreement with family and/or friends' beliefs to disagreement with family, friends, or community's beliefs. Others, particularly autonomous Atheists, gradually acclimated into the new social community without a strong sense of losing prior social community. A few converts remain socially or vocationally active within an Atheistic or secularized community while still pursuing active participation in a Christian community.³¹⁴

9.3.2. Identity

Within a change of community, a change of identity also occurs. A person's sense of self-identity, dignity and value is established in their community through the group's understanding and embodiment of their worldview. Naturalistic Atheists limit their self-understanding to their community's understanding of limitations within the natural world. That is, in their view since nothing exists beyond nature, they, too, are limited to a natural existence and identity. Atheists may draw a sense of identity from their community, their own human capacities, experiences, and Atheist narratives and texts. Alternatively, Christians

³¹⁴ See Appendix 12.9.2., Tables 67 and 68 for narrative examples of Context and Community transformation.

consider ultimate reality as a transcendent, supernatural, personal being (God) who created humanity in His image with inherent dignity, respect, value, and divine purposes. Language from the bible as well as the Christian community also shapes self-understanding of Christian identity. As these two meta-narratives are starkly different, evidence of biographical reconstruction should be demonstrated from pre- to post-conversion self-identity.³¹⁵ Themes emerged during narrative analysis, providing insight into change of identity from Atheist to Christian through conversion.³¹⁶

Identity shifts are observed in moving from skepticism/Atheism to Christian/disciple of Jesus, self-perceived pride towards humility, autonomy and independence towards a sense of calling to purposes beyond self, as well as dependencies (addiction, depression) towards freedom. Pre-conversion language did not reflect any sense of need for salvation until the point of or following conversion. Many perceived themselves as intelligent, reasoned, moral or immoral individuals throughout the conversion process. Converts generally moved from a sense of arrogance and pride to a perception of humility as they came to believe in the reality of God, their realization of their own sinfulness and pride, their need for repentance and condition of ‘being saved’. At the Catalyst and Conversion Stages, a humbled ‘saved’ identity emerges. Two primary shifts surfaced during narrative analysis of Identity:

Table 32. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts - Identity

Identity	BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION - Identity:
23/23; 100.0%	<p>□ ⊗ ‘I/We’ to ‘More than I/We’ shift: Primary identity shifts from independent self (‘I’) or within community of Atheists (‘We’) moving to primary identity focus as a Christian within a believing community yet transcending the individual and/or group (‘More than we’).</p>
9/23; 39.1%	<p>And</p> <p>□ ⊗ ‘Heightened self’ to ‘Humbled self’ shift in considering self and others: Movement from self-perceived heightened sense of self and/or superiority over religious persons towards a more humbled self-perspective and perception through Conversion Stages.</p>

³¹⁵ This view of identity deliberately focuses upon self-perception as related to two opposing views of reality, but fully acknowledges many different influences shape identity beyond this limited perspective, the investigation of which go well beyond the scope of this research. For purposes of focused narrative analysis, necessary limitations are placed.

³¹⁶ See Appendix 12.9.3. Identity Narrative Themes, Table 69.

The first shift ‘I/We’ to ‘More than I/We’ shows a change in self-and/or community identity from a merely naturalistic view to an identity established by belief in God, supernatural reality, and the converts’ own sense of immortality. Narrative analysis reveals primary identity shifting from independent self (‘I’) or within community of Atheists (‘We’) moving to primary identity focus as a Christian within a believing community yet transcending the individual and/or group (‘More than we’) because of the reality of God. Every convert in the sample group used language reflecting this shift as their identity changed from Atheist to Christian. The next prominent shift observed in identity during narrative analysis is a change in converts’ sense of arrogance which was reduced during the conversion process. More than one-third of converts expressed movement from self-perceived heightened sense of self and/or superiority over religious persons towards a more humbled self-perspective and perception through Conversion Stages. Four narrative examples demonstrate this shift are located in the Appendix.³¹⁷

Thus, movement from ‘old identity’ to ‘new identity’ included not only self-perception as individuals but also identity as part of the Christian community. Paradoxically, this new Christian identity shapes their view of their former selves as Atheists (such as describing their former selves as ‘blind’ or ‘rebel without a clue’) as well as their new general perception of Atheists. For example, Ryan stated, ‘*We are not in an elevated position over our Atheist neighbors. We are in a position of being rescued from being exactly where they were.*’ This language demonstrates the biographical reconstruction of identity as seeing himself as well as others through a new lens through the conversion process.

9.3.3. Experience

Just as identity is influenced by community and beliefs, life experience also informs perceptions of self and others as well as the attractiveness and plausibility of beliefs. Further, life experience shapes our personal desires either towards or away from change, particularly

³¹⁷ See Appendix 12.9.3. Identity shifts Tables 70 and 71.

regarding religion. In studying life experience from sample religious conversion interviews, several narrative themes materialized. Two primary biographical reconstruction themes emerged through narrative analysis of life experience: a) general life experience and b) personal experience with Christians and/or Christianity - whether positive, changing, and/or negative - and, their effect(s) on resistance or attraction to religious belief. The expectation is that converts' personal lives and engagement with Christians transforms from pre-conversion 'old experience' to post-conversion 'new experience'. These biographical reconstruction shifts in life experience and experience with Christians are seen in the following chart:

Table 33. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts - Experience

Experience	BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION – Experience:
09/23; 39.1%	<input type="checkbox"/> ⊗ 'Unfavorable' to 'Favorable' shift in personal life experience pre/post conversion: Movement from perceived negative pre-conversion life experience to positive life experience through and/or after conversion.
15/23; 65%	Or <input type="checkbox"/> ⊗ 'Favorable' to 'More favorable' shift in personal life experience: The individual reported increasingly positive life experiences throughout stages of conversion.
8/23; 35.8%	And <input type="checkbox"/> ⊗ 'Unfavorable' to 'Favorable' shift in experience with Christians: Movement from perceived negative or mixed experiences with Christians to describing more positive experiences with Christians through progression of and beyond conversion.
0/23; 30.4%	Or <input type="checkbox"/> ⊗ 'Favorable' to 'More favorable' shift in experience with Christians: The individual spoke of neutral and/or increasingly positive experience with Christians throughout stages of belief change.

First, respondents described the influence of general life experience on their conversion. At the Atheist Stage, over one-third of the sample group considered themselves as coping with negative circumstances and/or events. The remaining two-thirds conveyed a neutral or positive life experience. Changing life experiences during the Catalyst Stage caused some converts to become exposed to new (religious) people and circumstances, prompting openness towards religious belief. 'Changing narrative' themes include moving to a new context (such as different community, job, home, or university), relationship change,

or personal life crisis.³¹⁸ One person in the sample group spoke of a profound experience with beauty (through nature and classical music) impressing upon him a sense of something ‘bigger going on here’. ‘New Experience’ themes through and following conversion are linked with positive changes in relationships, decisions, and behaviors, whether experienced immediately or over time.³¹⁹ However, life adjustment to Christian living was not always positive or easy. Three participants spoke of the challenges in adapting to the changes in their new Christian lives.³²⁰

Secondly, personal experience with Christians and Christianity proved to be an important factor affecting resistance from and/or attraction towards religious belief. Specific language and themes voiced by the converts in describing their prior pre-conversion and present experience with and/or as Christians are in the Appendix. Through the conversion process, the leading Atheist narrative theme is limited and/or negative experience with religious people. Two-thirds in the sample analysis expressed negative language in describing their perception of and personal experience with Christians or other similar (Mormon, Jehovah’s Witness) people. Despite the majority Atheist impression of Christians as undesirable, Sean experienced a religious family as a child whose outward love, warmth, care, and hospitality made a lasting impression upon him. He stated, ‘When you are a little kid and there is that warmness and you haven’t experienced that, that’s attractive. But I knew

³¹⁸ See Appendix 12.9.4. Life Experience Narrative Themes, Table 72.

³¹⁹ As an example, Melissa describes her post-conversion life experience transformation: ‘How my world changed? I basically threw everything up in the air and trusted God with it on the initial thing that kicked it off. Even though I had no idea what was going on, it was just like I felt compelled by whatever was happening to me to throw everything up in the air and trust God with it. Besides guiding me to tell my husband the truth that day, God helped me quit smoking and let go of other addictions. Life wasn’t all sunshine and roses—things got much worse before they got better, but God was on our side and carried us through the storm of insanity. I refer to it sometimes as the fiery whirlwind. God broke me, sifted me and refined me. He made His saving love real to me by offering me His hand and giving me the choice to be saved out of the mud when I still wallowed in it. The transformation God brought about in my life helped me and my husband go from the nightmarish brink of divorce, to best friends in love all over again, united in our faith. He helped me gradually restore the intimacy mothers are supposed to share with our children.’

³²⁰ Post-conversion life experience - the challenge of Christian living: ‘It is challenging to reshape life as a Christian through the sanctification process.’ (Kyle) ‘It is after conversion where the very difficult things start – standards, beliefs – ‘very challenging’ ‘mentally taxing’ ‘Ultimately rewarding but it is not easy.’ (Ryan) ‘And then my thinking shifted, everything shifted, my perspective, everything. But it wasn’t overnight. It wasn’t a joyful thing. I think part of that is that my circumstances were difficult at the time. Part of it was just was that it was very sobering. This is huge. But it had to be that for me to buy into it.’ (Jessica)

For more narrative examples of life change, see Appendix 12.9.4., Table 73.

at an early age that that had to be because they were religious. Something about them, the religious part of them made them like that. That was always intriguing. As a little kid, I always dreamed of being in a family like that.’

Changing narrative themes began to emerge when experiences with Christians became more positive.³²¹ As with observations made within Community and Context, Atheists typically met and/or befriended Christian(s) whose lives countered the Atheists’ negative expectations. For example, when the Christian(s) were surprisingly intelligent, loving, or genuine, the Atheists’ negative perceptions and misunderstanding were challenged, their resistance disarmed, and many found themselves attracted to those whom they once held in contempt. Or, some Atheists were challenged by Christians to consider and study more deeply that for which they were contending or rejecting. This opened the possibility towards reconsideration of the authenticity of Christians and the legitimacy of Christianity, eventually leading towards conversion. After conversion, new experiences shape their life stories as they learn to experientially embody the Christian life. This prominent theme serves not only to reflect ongoing transformation in their own new lives as Christians but also to display a different kind of Christian than the one they once rejected in an effort to breakdown negative Christian stereotypes. To illustrate, two stories demonstrate the biographical reconstruction shift in *experience* with Christians, from favorable to more favorable.³²² For clarification, an Atheist can have a strong negative perception of Christianity with or without negative personal experience with Christians. Both narratives show how positive interaction with Christians caused Atheists to become more open towards conversion, although their pre-conversion contempt for Christians were quite different.

9.3.4. Emotional Sense-Making

Emotions potentially guide our understanding of, desire, or lack of desire for religious belief. Common themes arose from narrative analysis of ‘old’, ‘changing’, and ‘new’

³²¹ See Appendix 12.9.4. Experience with Christians Narrative Themes, Table 74.

³²² See Appendix 12.9.4., Tables 75 and 76.

emotional sense-making during religious conversion. Narrative analysis revealed emotional contempt towards God, Christians, and Christianity as a prominent theme for two-thirds of the sample group at the Atheist Stage. This anger is described as stemming from parents' modelled contempt, personal painful events, experiences and unanswered prayer, as well as contempt towards sensed religious 'stupidity, moralizing, and hypocrisy'.³²³ Changing emotional sense-making occurs in a variety of ways, ranging from encountering negative events (such as a personal crisis) to positive experiences with Christians or intellectual appreciation of Christianity. It is not surprising that some who are hostile towards God may be softened through an experience of personal valuing, comfort, or care from a religious person. However, even as some were beginning to approach Christianity through intellectual sense-making, they had difficulty releasing their long-held contempt towards God and/or Christians. This resulted in an approach/avoidance conflict in moving towards religious conversion. Others experienced fear or felt loss from family or social group rejection after conversion. However, this emotional loss was exchanged for 'conversion joy and peace', easing the pain of relational difficulties. Post-conversion transformation from negative to positive emotions was also observed in those who had experienced personal pain in their lives. Another interesting post-conversion theme was not the complete loss of anger, but the

³²³ Two narrative examples of emotional contempt towards God at the Atheist Stage:

1) The death of Jessica's best friend caused pain and emotional anger towards and distancing from God towards Atheism: 'When I was 22, my best friend, a girl that was Catholic, died in a car accident, and that...Any remaining shred of thought of praying or anything like that was gone. She had actually gotten involved and some pretty rough things, drugs and such... She had been sober for only three months when she died. The accident was not her fault. And I just felt like, 'Okay God, you are a horrible, horrible thing if you are real because that's disgusting. Like, why would you do that, like, are you laughing? You just put all of her friends and family through this and then she just comes back around, and you just snuff out her life. Like, is this a sick joke?'

That night that she died, I left the hospital and just was a disaster and I drove around screaming at God. I reached a point where I was like yes, no, he is not there because I felt no comfort or anything. It wasn't like I wasn't saying, 'God, if you're real God prove it.' It was like this: 'I hate you, I really, really hate you if you were there,' that kind of thing. I didn't feel anything, like I love you or anything like that, so I said, 'I think that's it.' So, for a while, for a year or two I got the closest I ever was to believing deep down that there was no God. And, I don't know, on one hand I would've sworn up and down that I did not believe that God existed and on the other hand I blamed him for what was going on.'

2) Paul was angry at God not answering his prayer, allowing his father to die following a heart attack: 'I was angry at God because I didn't get what I wanted. And I went on the war path and was just, I went from not knowing to being absolutely certain that there was no God and I was bound and determined to prove it to everybody that I came into contact with.'

He described his anger towards God: 'When I was still home in Pennsylvania, I went in to the bookstore and took all of the Bibles and put them in the Christian fiction section. I had a girl that I worked with who shared the gospel with me one time and I looked her in the eye and said f___ you and f___ your God. So, I was not wishy-washy in what I believed. I was definitely...The worst person that you can pay to share the gospel with, I was him.'

turning of anger back towards those (particularly due to secular bias) who had not given them the fair opportunity to know of the fullness and veracity of the Christian story.

Two primary biographical reconstruction shifts in emotional sense-making were observed from pre- to post-conversion metanarrative, highlighting whether or not anger/contempt was part of the converts' stories. The first shift begins from expression of anger/contempt to emotional resolution. The second shift, 'Non-angry Atheist to Christian' affirms neutral and/or positive emotions throughout the stages of belief change. Below is a chart showing movement from 'old' to 'new' emotional sense-making themes:

Table 34. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts - Emotional Sense-Making

Table 34. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts – Emotional Sense-Making	
<p>Emotional Sense-Making</p> <p>15/23; 65.2%</p>	<p>BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION – Sense Making Emotional</p> <p>☐ ⊗ ‘Anger/Contempt’ to ‘Resolution’ shift: Movement from emotional anger towards people, life events, God and/or Christians towards emotional peace and in the goodness, forgiveness, and reality of God (and the brokenness of the world) through a Christian perspective.</p> <p>or</p>
<p>08/23; 34.8%</p>	<p>☐ ⊗ ‘Non-angry Atheist’ to ‘Christian’: The individual described neutral and/or positive emotions throughout the stages of belief change.</p>

Biographical reconstruction shifts in emotional sense-making are seen through these examples in which converts move from emotional anger, disappointment, distrust, and relational brokenness to emotional resolution through peace, joy and relief found through conversion. Examples (located in the Appendix) demonstrate the influential nature of emotions as informing disbelief and resistance, openness, changing attitudes, and finally the ability to emotionally accept and even embrace a view once held in contempt.

Transformation in emotional sense-making occurred due to varying factors ranging from encountering emotional care and concern from Christians as well as intellectual integrity of Christianity to spiritual experiences and reported personal encounter(s) with God or Jesus.

9.3.5. Purpose and Meaning

Humans are ‘meaning-seeking’ beings (Greil, 1977), driven towards finding purpose in living. Within the Naturalistic Atheism worldview, there is no inherent or objective

purpose. Rather, life purpose and meaning are self-determined by each individual towards that which brings personal satisfaction. Alternatively, the Christian worldview holds that humans are made in the image of God, objectively purposed towards and given satisfaction in knowing and loving Him, living according to His will and purposes.

The most prominent ‘Old Purpose and Meaning’ narrative theme during Atheism centered around an elevated sense of autonomy in life choices and direction. Some enjoyed this freedom with little or occasional reflection while others deeply felt and/or soberly considered life’s existential questions. Atheists also described finding life purposes for material gain, personal pleasure, or an ideological movement such as environmentalism. As Atheists, two people in the sample group expressed a passion towards undermining religious people and belief, specifically Christianity. ‘Changing purpose and meaning’ narratives revealed a growing sense of dissatisfaction within the Atheist lifestyle provoking deeper existential questioning and a willing openness to begin ‘searching for more’. Three respondents described a felt conflict between their moral freedom and their sense of ‘moral oughtness’ causing dissonance and intellectual questing towards resolution.

No clear narrative themes are found at the Conversion Stage. However, robust narrative themes emerge at the post-conversion phase as converts adopted a new sense of purpose and meaning. Christian themes emerge countering old narratives, describing a deep sense of satisfaction and stability as their smaller stories as finding an embodied place and purpose within the larger story of God. Key narrative themes include finding and fulfilling God’s purposes for their lives, seeking to know, grow, live, work, and share in the work of God through education, discipling, teaching, ministry, apologetics and evangelism. Narrative analysis of purpose and meaning across religious conversion uncovered central themes.

Primary biographical reconstruction shifts observed from ‘old’ to ‘new’ purpose and meaning through religious conversion are 1) ‘Emptiness to satisfaction’ shift whereby a person moves from existential emptiness towards joy, satisfaction, meaning, and other-directed life purposes in God, and 2) ‘My will to God’s will’ shift through movement from

self-centered purposes to God’s ultimate purposes. Although analysis investigated for a lack of shift in purpose and meaning, none of the converts’ narratives fit this profile.

Table 35. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts – Purpose and Meaning

Purpose & Meaning	BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION– Purpose and Meaning
19/23; 82.6%	<p>☒ ⊗ ‘Emptiness’ to ‘Satisfaction’ shift: Movement from existential emptiness towards joy, satisfaction, meaning and ‘other-directed’ life purposes in God.</p>
21/23; 91.3%	<p>And/or</p> <p>☒ ⊗ ‘My purposes’ to ‘God’s purposes’ shift: Movement from self-centered purposes (‘my will’) towards God’s ultimate purposes (‘God’s will’).</p>
01/23; 4.3%	<p>or</p> <p>☒ ⊗ No clear shift in purpose/meaning: The individual’s felt satisfaction and/or life purposes did not appear to change.</p>

Narrative analysis revealed purpose and meaning as a critical component and indicator of biographical reconstruction and life change in religious conversion. A strong majority among the sample group demonstrated a shift from ‘emptiness to satisfaction’ in life meaning. All but two used language expressing movement from self- to God-driven life purposes. Only one narrative did not provide any language of observable transformation in this area. The following quoted passages illustrate remarkable clarity in converts describing pivotal moments in conversion or perspectives due to the influence of purpose and meaning:

Table 36. Purpose and Meaning Narrative Quotes

Purpose and Meaning Narrative quotes:
<p>Amanda’s Atheistic worldview informed her view of meaning and purpose: ‘[My Atheism] really affected how I thought about the world, especially my evolutionary mindset. I was very conceited. I thought, ‘Well, I’m smart, talented, and this and that. I’m definitely ahead of the pack here and so my thinking was that I’m more evolved than these people. And so, I thought <i>whatever I want to do comes from my biology and how I evolved and how advanced I am. So, whatever I feel like doing is right. Whatever I feel like doing is what I’ll do because evolution is really the only thing that means anything and that doesn’t have ultimate meaning but I’m going to live now.</i> That’s pretty much how it is. And so, I was pretty much a hedonist in that sense. I mean I wasn’t super wild or anything, but I did whatever I felt like doing at that point.’</p> <p>When she experienced a sense of cognitive dissonance regarding the logic of her direction as a doctor, she became depressed and wondered ‘what to do with herself’: ‘And I was like, ‘Whoa, this is really hard for me now because I want to help people through medicine, but I’m actually making things worse on that genetic level for mankind.’ You know what I mean? And then I started feeling really depressed. <i>Then I wasn’t going to classes. I was skipping them and wondering what I was going to do with myself.</i> And then I was like, maybe I’ll just get married and be a biology teacher at this point. I don’t know. Not that that’s bad. But, my educational path, I was like, ‘<i>What am I going to do with all</i></p>

this education I have and now I think it's all meaningless. So, I guess I'll just do a comfortable, easy path. I guess I'll just have to find whatever makes me feel good about this."³²⁴

When Jennifer began studying religion and the bible, she began to see the purposed life within Christianity:

'I was also researching world religions for my thesis, but something, there had always been a longing in me that I knew was there but now I was able to sit with it.' 'I began to then realize that the option of Atheism held nothing. It was meaningless.'

'Although skeptical and cynical, I began to see more and more how hollow such a life is, and what the promise of an 'abundant' life that Jesus spoke of and represented really was.' 'I believe that some unspeakable combination of both free will (in that I pursued, out of my want and ache - *sensucht*) and yet God's will (in that I was pursued, and extended grace) was at work in my life.'³²⁵

The meaninglessness of his life prompted Matthew to become more open to the possibility of God and willing to 'look into it':

And, I was pretty miserable, and I was like, 'Well, I really don't want to live like this.' If there was any meaning to life, I was willing to look into it. I kind of did one of those, 'God, if you are there, show me. I don't think that you're there' but I guess I just got sick of just purposelessness and pointlessness of life.'

'If there is just no purpose to life, then you can do whatever you want, and it feels good for a while, but it is ultimately really unsatisfying. And, no matter what you try and what you go to, and that is what I saw as well, I could be rich and have tons of money, but it is still going to be meaningless. I could party and do a bunch of drugs or all kinds of other things to experience pleasure but at the end of the day, it doesn't amount to anything. So, I don't know why, I was just maybe more introspective than a lot of kids that I don't know for any reason in particular. And then there were a few kids in my high school who either had a car accident and died, or there was this one kid who committed suicide; and, it was about that time when I started thinking about death, and if there is something out there beyond this life then I better know about it. I really don't think that there is.

I would say I almost wanted there to be something at that time just to make sense of it all, but I was very, very skeptical that it could even be possible, or even be there, that there was anything to it. There was a point where I wanted it to be true, but I was skeptical that it could be true. [what prompted you back to an active search of God? Did you start a general seeking or searching?] I guess I wanted to give it a shot and so I was like, 'Well, if there's something out there, show me'...And, I mean, I was becoming more and more open to Christianity.'

Ryan's pivotal moment producing openness to God and Christianity:

'This happened much later when I was a Christian, but there was a family went through a few years when their son was age 12 or 13 when he died of brain cancer. But he was involved in that whole process for at least a few years...it was just a very long, slow, painful process that ended up killing him. And I remember thinking about that afterwards. And I forget the British philosopher, his challenge to Christians was 'What do Christians say at the bed of a dying child?' It was Bertrand Russell. But everyone has to ask that question.

And I look at this family, this Christian family that lost their son, and at the time, I was like, 'I know what a Christian says in this situation, but what does an Atheist say? Tough luck? Well, you've got to go sometime?' That's all that they have. But, a Christian can look at it and say, 'this isn't just unfortunate. It's bad. This is not the way the world is supposed to be.' And at the time, I knew that, but I didn't know what the significance of that was. 'Well, hey, death is actually a bad thing and only Christians really have an answer to that.' That is something that got me thinking a lot of hours on.'

³²⁴ Amanda's sense of meaninglessness even caused her to dismiss her potential career as a physician. She was intellectually honest enough with her belief system that it had practical consequences for her life.

³²⁵ Jennifer's felt hollowness in life contributed to her willingness to consider the abundant life offered by Jesus. Despite her skepticism, she was willing to look more closely. She had good insight into the variety of factors influencing her towards questing. Oxford Dictionary: German '*sensucht*': yearning; wishful longing.

'And it was sort through that that I started listening to what Christians had to say on other topics. There are other things in the world that I have questions on. So, *I think that was the one that really opened my eyes.*'

Post-conversion:

John reflects upon the seriousness with which he considers life's big questions:

'If you are real human beings in real space, time history, asking real questions about real life then you are forced to think why do I think Christianity is true? Is it better than those others? Not in the sense of superior but in the sense of being able to deliver something that can [] your salvation. *But I think that uncritical, unexamined life where I was on one level is just a lazy, over-familiarity with what is. But, if I'm going to be engaged, I think part of that is to take life very, very seriously. To take these questions very seriously. But they are not about philosophy and theology, I mean they involve that, but they are about existence. And, that's a level that some people don't like to get to.*

John speaks of the need for engaging people in considering life's big questions:

'I think more and more in a world of materialism and secularism where we are saturated with toys and noise and everything else, we've got to become soul detectives, which is to try to use questions and issues to lead people towards the things that really count. *And I think the biggest in our army, truth, goodness and beauty are those tools that God has placed in His world for us to use as connectors to like the questions of hunger and desire, what is it you really want? Will a car really answer that? Will a holiday? Yes, you can have a great holiday but then what is it beyond that? France next year? And eventually you can't go because you've got a broken leg or something and then what? It's exhausting.*' ³²⁶

The second main shift in biographical reconstruction within purpose and meaning is the transformation from autonomous living ('my purposes') to God-centered living ('God's purposes'). This quote represents those in the sample group who, once they understood the grand nature of God and His story and purposes, made decisions towards conversion:

Table 37. Purpose and Meaning Narrative 'my purposes' to 'God's purposes' Quote

Purpose and Meaning Narrative 'my purposes' to 'God's purposes' quote:

Through and after conversion, Jessica recognized the focus of her life was to be about God, not herself:

'The single most important thing that was presented to me...God was more of a, He was presented to me at the exact same time as He was presented like a Santa Claus figure. He was presented as this harsh, harsh disciplinarian so it didn't really go together but *I was finally told for the first time that 'Hey, this isn't about you.'* That is all that I ever thought God was, from Christians at least, that God was someone they looked to solve their problems or to give them things they wanted and also told them what to do, what rules to follow. *But I had never heard that you live for him, that it is about him. And so... That doesn't mean that he doesn't love me. It means he is so much, vastly more huge than any of that. All of that is such a small, small thing – not that it is insignificant, but He is huge. He is about so much more than all of that.*

So, just feeling okay, *it is not all about me.* You would think that would be to get a sad thing, or a bummer, like, now I have to live for someone else, but it was very much like okay, *this is something I can believe.* And I think that was the turning point, honestly. *There was something shallow about Christianity the way it was presented before, and this was very, very deep and very, very real. It was is just bigger than me. So being told, 'Hey, get over yourself...God doesn't exist to grant your wishes or any of that. You exist to glorify Him' and that was huge.* So, a few days after I tried praying, it hit me and it was a very, *it wasn't like a joyful 'Yay,*

³²⁶ This passage also demonstrates the reflective nature of this individual, not only towards his own life but also the need in others' lives. He appears to have found a coherence, a lasting satisfaction in God that the temporal things of the world cannot sustain. John is now intentional – not only self-reflective about existential issues but in helping others consider life's big questions of purpose and meaning. For John, the enduring satisfaction found within Christianity provides 'compelling power to its authentication'. He seems to see the existential and rational components of Christianity as reinforcing one another.

*Now I know what I'm going to live for.' It was 'Whoa, this is a very, very big deal.' I almost feel like I mourned for a couple of days or weeks or months my decision. I don't think there was ever a point right then when I sat down and prayed the sinner's prayer, is more something that settled in my heart and in my mind, like 'Okay, this is what life is now. This is what it is.'*³²⁷

9.3.6. Personal Will and Desire

Narrative analysis revealed various themes of resistance and/or openness towards belief in God and/or Christianity throughout the conversion process. Based on narrative analysis, biographical reconstruction of personal will and desire primarily occurred in two ways: 1) a 'closed to open' shift in which converts move from experiential, emotional, volitional, spiritual, and/or intellectual resistance to God and/or Christians towards openness regarding the reality and goodness of God and/or Christianity, and 2) a 'open to more open' shift whereby potential converts describe an open, increasing willingness towards an alternative belief throughout religious conversion. Within the sample group in this study, three-fourths of participants described a closed posturing towards religious belief and believers prior to transitioning to an open willingness to consider the potential reality of God. One out of every five recounted an openness and desire for belief in God as Atheists but typically did not think good reasons for such belief existed.

Table 38. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts – Personal Will and Desire

Will/Desire	BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION – Will/Desire:
18/23; 78.2%	<p>☒ ⊗ 'Closed' to 'Open' shift: Movement from experiential, emotional, volitional and/or intellectual resistance to God and/or Christians towards openness regarding the reality and goodness of God and/or Christians.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>☒ ⊗ 'Open' to 'More open' shift: The individual reported and/or demonstrated an open, increasing willingness towards alternative belief potentiality throughout stages of belief.</p>
05/23; 21.7%	

Personal Will and Desire phases generally shifted from 'old will and desire' at the Atheist Stage, 'changing will and desire' at the Catalyst Stage, and 'new will and desire' at

³²⁷ This is an extraordinary passage revealing a deep understanding of who God is, who she is, and the ultimate purpose of life. Her honesty is clear here when she states that she 'mourned' her decision, her need to give up what she had long held on to, and the new understanding of her life as no longer primarily about herself but about God. Two converts in this study, including Jessica, explicitly affirmed the 'grandness' of God and His story as a motivation towards conversion.

the Conversion and Post-Conversion Stages. Analysis of ‘old will and desire’ narrative during Atheist Stage yielded a variety of themes towards a closed posturing towards God. Narrative themes included closed volitional will (‘I don’t want God to exist), moral will (‘I don’t want moral authority), intellectual sense-making (‘There is no good reason or evidence for God’), emotional sense-making (‘A good God does not exist), socio-cultural influence (macro- or micro- community sway towards non-belief), or even spiritual will (‘I was blind’). With high level of resistance and closed posturing towards God and Christianity, it raises questions as to what precipitated a changing personal will and desire for God? What was the catalytic event, circumstance, and/or information which caused the ‘walls to drop’, ‘Atheism to soften’, ‘curiosity and intrigue’ to begin, and the willingness to genuinely ‘go where the evidence leads’³²⁸ start? Further, do the converts’ primary reasons for a closed Atheism relate to their explanations for changing towards openness? Further, the narrative theme of ‘Atheistic openness’ towards belief in God surfaced as a surprising theme. In looking back at their phase of disbelief, five participants described themselves as open, appreciating the beauty of the Christian story, the meaning it provided, and its desirability. They wanted Christianity to be true but were skeptical that it was. Catalyst narrative themes included non-crisis- to crisis-related language as well as issues of sense-making, experience, purpose and meaning. Although these particular themes are also explored in their respective sections, it is crucial to consider that individual catalysts are not artificially isolated, generally speaking, but integrated in producing openness.

One theme of particular interest was the movement from closed posturing to a ‘skeptical openness’ as related by two participants. The idea of moving in the direction towards Christianity was so personally unpalatable, that they found themselves ‘kicking and screaming’ towards conversion. In another example, David moved from a strongly adamant resistance to sudden belief, confirmed by a spiritual experience. He states,

³²⁸ Language used by respondents.

‘Some of it I picked up because of talking to my dad, but I hated Christians. By this time, when I was talking to my friend while I was out partying with them, *‘If I ever become a Christian, take my gun and blow my brains out and put me out of my misery.’* And that is actually a quote. I would get my friends to swear that because that is how I felt about it... And then he [a Christian television evangelist] gives his alter call and he turns to the TV. Now all of you who want to ask Jesus into their life, get on your knees and lift your hands in the air.

I put my drug paraphernalia down, I’m getting on my knees and putting my hands up in the air and repeating this prayer. I saw and felt something. For the longest time, I described it as fairy dust coming out of the ceiling or whatever. I know now when you get saved the Holy Spirit comes on you. And I saw the Holy Spirit come.

So, the very next night, I had gone from, *‘If I ever become a Christian, take my gun and let my brains out and put me out of my misery’* to the very next night ...I’m getting high with my friends and I said, *‘You’ll never guess what I did last night.’* And they said, ‘What?’ And I said, *‘I think I asked Jesus to come into my life.’* They started calling me out on all of the stuff that I had just previously, not a week before, said to them. That was in September 1994 that that happened. I was 24. Easter 1995 I started going to church...and I have been going there ever since that night.’³²⁹

More biographical reconstruction narrative examples from ‘old’ to ‘new’ will/desire made by respondents during the conversion process are located in the Appendix.

9.4. Biographical Reconstruction in Religious Conversion - Substance Influences

Along with the functional aspects, a basic element of religious conversion includes the acceptance of the beliefs practiced by each religious faith system. Within Christianity, this belief component becomes a part of the religious conversion process as the potential convert comes to a place of intellectual, experiential, and/or spiritual knowledge with enough conviction to place their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Within that framework, narrative analysis is conducted on both intellectual sense-making as well as spiritual aspects of conversion to determine their respective roles.

³²⁹ Earlier in his story, David had come to believe in God through an answered prayer and providential circumstance but he still ‘hated Christians’ until the moment of his conversion experience.

9.4.1. Intellectual Sense-Making

Within intellectual sense-making, the dominant Atheist narrative themes centered on the presumed believability and credibility of Atheism as compared to the presumed unbelievability and lack of credibility of religious belief. Contexts and communities fostered absence of personal exposure to or interaction with Christians or the substance of Christianity, negative messaging towards religious belief (particularly Christianity), and/or intellectual undermining of Christianity as a viable worldview (particularly in the university setting or in popular writings). A prevalent theme contrasted Atheism as the view of science and reason as compared to the superstitious, anti-intellectual, and unscientific nature of religious belief. When Atheists engaged with Christians, substantive responses were not given (or heard), authentic life change was not observed, and some Atheists (such as Sean, Matthew, David, and Jeremy) intentionally tried to belittle Christians and mock Christianity.

Biographical reconstruction patterns within Intellectual sense-making included 1) ‘Conflict to resolution’ shift in moving from cognitive dissonance regarding Atheism as insufficient to ground understanding and experience of reality towards dissonance resolution through understanding the truths of Christianity as sufficiently explanatory; 2) ‘Uninformed to Informed’ shift in moving from Atheism to Christianity in moving from rejection of God and Christianity from a self-considered ‘uninformed’ perspective towards belief in God and Christianity as the best explanation for reality from an ‘informed’ perspective. This shift can occur prior to or after conversion. This form of questing is driven by a desire for knowledge and understanding more than a resolution of cognitive dissonance; and, 3) ‘Uninformed to Uninformed’ shift in moving from Atheism to Christianity whereby Intellectual sense-making did not appear to influence stages of conversion:

conversion. Long-standing distaste for religious belief caused initial resistance towards conversion to Christianity, despite intellectual acceptance of its truth. As shown in the Appendix, Michelle's story highlighted the role of the personal will in conversion. Sean and Ryan contended they would not have chosen to become Christians apart from God's intervention in their lives. Continuing skepticism surfaced as a continuing theme throughout the conversion process even post-conversion. As an intellectually driven population, several expressed enough confidence in Christianity to convert, but remain open and diligent towards continuing pursuit of truth and evidence, wherever it led.

Post-conversion, central themes pointed towards embodying a 'thinking faith' - not only for themselves but for the intentional countering of culturally negative Christian stereotypes. The drastic change in their worldview and 'in their world' was admittedly difficult for many in adopting new beliefs, values, and behaviors. But, their belief in the comprehensive truth in the Christian worldview provided the foundation upon which their life change was based. For Kyle, 'Christianity...is intellectually satisfying because it gives you a philosophical, moral, pragmatic worldview that you can wrestle with in order to discover who you are and what your place in the world is.' The abundance and significance of language related to Intellectual sense-making confirmed the role of Substance (SI) in conversion stories of educated Atheists to Christianity.

9.4.2. Spirituality, Supernatural and Spiritual Experience

Narrative analysis revealed two potential spiritual biographical reconstruction shifts occurred in the lives of the converts: 1) 'denial of God' to 'belief in God' *through* spiritual experience pre-, during, or post-conversion; or, 2) 'denial of God' to 'belief in God' *without* spiritual experience. For clarification, although this second shift does not include a distinct spiritual encounter, it does not exclude a new sense of spiritual reality in their lives. Even they though no reported spiritual encounter, their language reflects spiritual involvement from God, spiritual transformation of themselves and others.

Table 40. Biographical Reconstruction Shifts – Spiritual Reality

Spiritual	<p>BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION – Spiritual Reality</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> ⊗ ‘Denial of God’ to ‘Belief in God’ shift through spiritual experience: Movement from denial of the Judeo-Christian God towards openness and belief in God’s existence through described spiritual experience pre-conversion, during conversion or post-conversion.</p> <p>Or</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> ⊗ ‘Denial of God’ to ‘belief in God’ shift without spiritual experience: Spiritual experience was not described as an influential component of religious conversion to Christianity.</p>
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Among the sample group, the majority of respondents were raised within a culture and/or family who expressed nominal or no religious belief with only three, (Amanda) (David) (Melissa), who came from a strongly religious or spiritual background. Atheism themes revealed a general drifting from and/or rejection of religion and spirituality in adolescence for various reasons ranging from negative socio-cultural, experiential, and intellectual influences to unanswered prayer. Three participants (Anthony, Heather, and Melissa) desired belief in God, considered it attractive, even beautiful, but not intellectually credible. Three (Jason, Amanda, and Michelle) described a sense of spiritual curiosity and experimentation prior to Atheism. Two (John and David) told of vivid encounters with dark spirituality. Curiously, despite these dark paranormal experiences, they did not entertain the possible existence of an alternative ‘good’ spirituality. One (Amanda) recounted spiritual experience(s) with God prior to conversion, but without belief in God, she dismissed them.

A range of narrative themes surfaced at the Catalyst Stage when converts’ stories were changing from disbelief towards spiritual belief. General spiritual curiosity and investigation of eastern forms of religion preceded openness towards Christianity (Christopher) (Jessica). The most common storyline towards Christian conversion was the influence of friends and/or family who encouraged church and/or youth group attendance where there was an opportunity to experience and come to know Christians, Christianity, ‘the gospel’, and the bible. Alternatively, (Christopher) described independent reading the bible,

particularly the person of Jesus, as ‘a spiritual experience’. Openness towards conversion also came through a sense of God’s personal engagement through answering prayer and providential circumstances.

At Conversion, narrative themes centered on personal response to ‘the gospel’ message of grace, forgiveness, and salvation through Jesus Christ. Converts described awareness of their own need, an experiential belief in its truth (they were broken, in need of saving) as well as convinced intellectual belief in its truth. Jennifer said, ‘There were no other religions that operated by grace, I began to realize that I was in a lot of trouble if it was karma, and that it spoke to something so unspeakably deep that I longed for and needed.’ Language of ‘conviction’ accompanied conversion, brought about through reading the bible, a gospel tract, the ‘Holy Spirit’, and/or prayer. Once ‘accepted Christ’, a sense of relief (‘It was like a two-ton weight just lifted off of my shoulders’ - Matthew) and ‘conversion joy’(Christopher) accompanied the conversion experience. Spiritual experiences also were described as accompanying conversion or prayer, including a felt presence of the Holy Spirit in the room. Another notable conversion theme was the idea that conversion was ‘the work of God’ and not the converts themselves: ‘It was all God. And thank God! I thank God that God chose me because I would not have chosen him.’ (Sean); ‘He takes out a heart of stone and puts in a heart of flesh.’ And without that, the evidence wouldn’t have mattered.’ (Ryan); ‘It doesn’t make any sense. It is definitely a God thing that I can’t explain.’ (Paul)

Post-conversion narrative themes centered upon a new way of spiritually seeing and living life as a follower of Jesus. For some, an immediate change occurred in the way they perceived the world: ‘I left the Matrix.’ (Joseph) ‘It was like I received Christian eyes...It was almost as if I was standing somewhere on the planet and the whole planet had shifted.’ (Amanda) ‘I just sensed like compassion towards them because I wanted them to have what I had.’ (Matthew) For others, life transformation was an important theme as they learned to live the Christian life. Melissa said,

God broke me, sifted me and refined me. He made His saving love real to me by offering me His hand and giving me the choice to be saved out of the mud when I still wallowed in it. The transformation God brought about in my life helped me and my husband go from the nightmarish brink of divorce to best friends in love all over again, united in our faith. He helped me gradually restore the intimacy mothers are supposed to share with our children.

Carl and David spoke of freedom from addictions and depression through God. Another post-conversion theme was a continuing intellectual skepticism. However, their uncertainties were alleviated through spiritual experiences which resolved lingering doubts as to whether or not God was real. In the eyes of the convert, the realization of the reality of God, spiritual remorse, and need for conversion is a pivotal moment. The language and symbolism used in Amanda's account is particularly vivid:

Table 41. Spiritual shift from 'old' to 'new' narrative

Amanda's moment of CONVERSION:
<p>When investigating the Christian worldview, Amanda was struck with a personal sense of remorse leading to conversion: 'One day, after several weeks of this, I was reading a refutation of my Atheistic evolutionary world-view that I couldn't counter and I was <i>suddenly struck with an immense sense of remorse, not just for my held beliefs that had turned out to be false but also for the actions that had grown out of them and how my statements and actions had influenced others--I began crying uncontrollably.</i> [My friend] asked, 'What's wrong?' And all I could say was, 'I'm wrong.'</p> <p>She describes the symbolic way she came to this sense of remorse and subsequent conversion: 'And I was sitting there with this book and I was reading. I had this sensation in my bedroom in my parents' house I had a mirror. I used to hang things on the mirror - like sashes and leis from performances, flowers and bouquets, things like that. The thing was so covered that when I looked at myself in the morning to brush my hair, I would actually have to push stuff away and then I could see my face real quick and, you know, it looks okay.</p> <p>But it was almost as if, when I was reading this book and then all of a sudden it hit me that I was wrong about evolution and really had been basing my morality and lifestyle on that belief that I thought was impenetrable. <i>And it was as if a mirror was in front of me, that mirror, and everything had been wiped away and I could finally see myself clearly, but as I truly was.</i> And I had this immense terrible feeling.</p> <p>I didn't think, 'Oh I feel so sinful or anything like that, but I had this very painful emotion and I started crying, really just weeping and weeping. And, [my friend] was sitting next to me reading and he was like, 'What's wrong?' And I could barely speak, and I just looked at him and I said, 'I am.' And he didn't really go into it with me. He just put his arm around me and let me cry and he held me, and I was just crying. But I realized that I was wrong, that I had been basing everything on something that was wrong, that I was wrong, that in myself I was wrong.</p> <p>We went to church a couple of days later and it was a Christmas service. There was an altar call. The pastor said, 'Turn to the person on your right and turn to the person on your left. Ask them, 'do you want to go up? I'll go up and pray with you.'" And so [my friend] was on my left. When the pastor said that, I immediately turned away because I was still in denial a little bit. But I felt myself, 'no I'm going to turn,' and I looked at him and he said it, and I said, 'Yeah, I do want to go up and I do want to pray.' And so, I went up during that call and we prayed. I didn't have an emotional kind of experience at that point, but I had a sense of satisfaction that I had made this public declaration, that I'd done it.'</p>

Amanda's NEW SPIRITUALITY:

Post-conversion: The day after her conversion, Amanda describes having received 'Christian eyes' to see life differently:

'I have this really distinct memory of earlier that day, that Sunday, I was at home and I was vegging in front of the tv and I was watching MTV Real World, the original reality show. It was one of the later iterations. I'm watching it and I'm chuckling at how shallow everybody is and 'they're so dumb.' And then I went to church and that happens, and I remember the next day and I was at home and I flicked on the tv and it was the same show and I remember I was watching it and I had this immediate reaction like, 'Whoa, there's something so deeply wrong about this. It is so shallow.' But I was looking at it in a completely different way.

And, I told [my friend], it was like I received Christian eyes...*It was almost as if I was standing somewhere on the planet and the whole planet had shifted. That was my experience. Everything had turned around. All my morals had flipped over and reversed. It was very sudden and instant that way.* Some people have asked me, 'I've seen people come to the Lord, but they don't really change right away but you changed almost instantly, like how you lived, everything.' I think it was because I had a certain background of feeling connected to God and everything.'

Here is an example of a convert's first prayer to God resulting in a spiritual experience:

Table 42. Prayer, Spiritual Experience, and Conversion narrative

Jeremy's first prayer prompted a SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE and religious conversion:

'I am profoundly shaken by something spiritual at a church. It was like walking up to the door of the house. It was like I know something lives there but I have no idea what they are actually like. And so, *my first prayer* was something along the lines of 'God, I have no idea of who you are or what you are, and I am not sure one hundred percent that you exist, but if you do, I want to know more about you.' The *response* there, it was only one of two times in my life that I had one of those *profoundly overwhelming spiritual experiences*. I still don't have the tools and the language to fully understand what that was. It wasn't like these bright flashing lights. I didn't go into a trance or anything, but it was this really bizarre essence, maybe that door opened a little bit and I thought 'Wow, *here we are shifting away from this academic playground to there's something deeper going on here.*'

It is one of those...I had this very distinct impression that time was either slowing down or stretching out if that makes sense. I was only there in that moment less than a minute certainly, but it was just really like, and I just remember coming out of it feeling dazed, like oh my goodness, what actually was that? It was very much, you know, there was something physiologically that seemed to be going on there. And I think for me it was, not to be cliché but this might be helpful in picking up the keywords in your research, that the *sense of peace*, the almost raw reality is like you are kind of, I don't know how to describe it as far as like looking at a hazy photograph of a sunset and then sort of like maybe just pulling down the edge and seeing something that like, wait a minute, *this thing actually, actually exists in reality. And I remember there was just this tremendous sense of awe.*

Again, I had no, my theology was not intact in have to say this, I know about this, but it was just that, *this experience of this thing is so much larger than me and is so much more powerful.* It was that kind of thing. It was one of those kinds of *experiences of godly fear* is how I would describe it as now. Is like this thing can, talk about an existential crisis, this thing can un-create me. This is this *tremendously powerful thing, but it is also this is tremendously good thing.* I wasn't scared in that sense, but very much respecting that this thing is really powerful. And I think that it is really, you know that experience that you get, I am big into poetry, so I mean if you read a really good poem or you hear an amazing piece of music and that kind of just like a breath to the soul, just that 'ahhh' like that's just nice. You are just, you've kind of experienced that and that is just, really like for me is the closest I can get in describing the sensation was it was this emotional, the baggage just kind of lifted...it is the *profound realness of it* – that was incredible. It was really, yeah.

I think that people who have really, truly had a *profound, shocking experience with God* will include in their books and discussions this grand mystery of the Holy Spirit and the otherness and closeness of God as really

incredible. But like I said for me, I just couldn't believe...If people try to put this into a bumper sticker and give it a thirty second spiel, I don't understand how you can do that. It was incredible for sure.

I would describe myself as a Christian after that point because I was able to see all of these traits of God coming together in the person of Jesus.'

These narrative excerpts illustrate the importance of including the emic point of view in the process of understanding and analyzing religious conversion as well as including Spiritual Experience (SE) as a critical component worthy of consideration.

9.5. Integrated Influences from Pre- to Post-Conversion Meta-Narrative

Religious conversion from one meta-narrative to another generates biographical reconstruction in many areas of the convert's life, as covered through this narrative analysis. Although distinct in many ways, all reported individual components dynamically interact throughout the conversion process. Each conversion narrative is as unique as each individual person. Particular influences gain and lose importance over the course of transformation. The thesis question at hand, however, is considering the role of Substance variables as related to Function components of conversion. Using narrative analysis, does Substance play a role? And, if so, to what extent are Substance and Function variables integrated within the religious conversion process? Further, how do the results from narrative analysis correlate with the proposed Narrative Analysis for Religious Conversion Model?

9.5.1 Integrated Narrative Analysis Memo

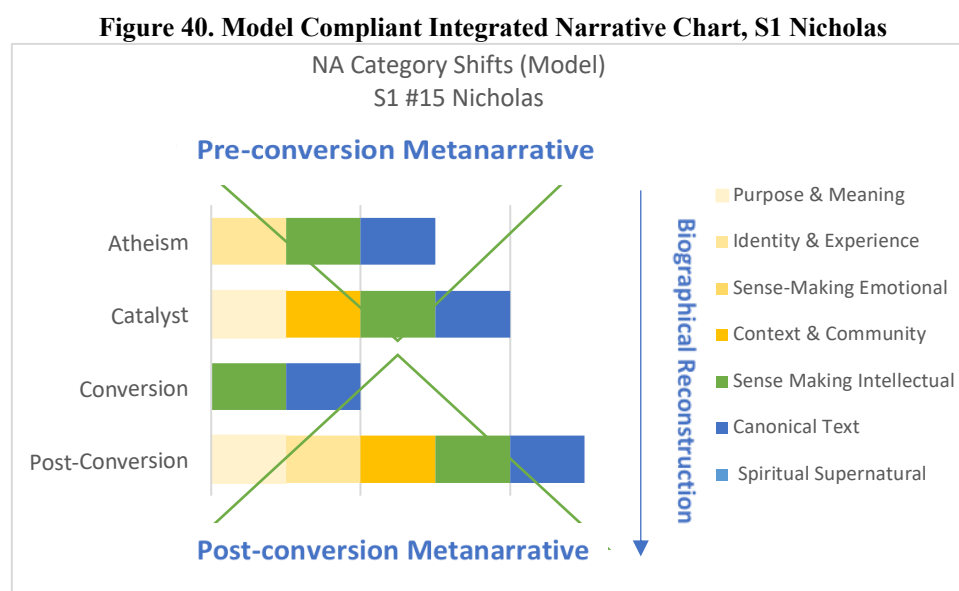
In order to assess the integration of Substance and Function elements through narrative analysis of the sample group (n = 23), each coded narrative was arranged according to influences per stage of conversion and compiled according to the conversion pattern assigned in the initial analysis of this work.³³² An integrated narrative analysis memo was constructed for each conversion story. The narrative analysis memos included: 1) Convert's brief auto-biographical conversion story written in the initial survey, 2) Convert's interview language samples from Atheism to Catalyst, Conversion, and Post-Conversion Stages. These

³³² Function primary religious conversion patterns F1 (n = 1), F2 (n = 8), F3 (n = 3), F4 (n = 1), or F5 (n = 2); and Substance primary religious conversion patterns S1 (n = 3), S2 (n = 2), S3 (n = 2), S4 (n = 1).

excerpts were organized by Function and Substance variables per stage and include reflexive comments, 3) Biographical reconstruction narrative themes for each variable with reflexive comments, and 4) Excel charts which give a visual portrayal of integrated influences which emerged through the convert's narrated conversion story. An example of an integrated narrative memo is provided for reference posted in the Appendix.³³³ All twenty-three subjects in the sample group underwent similar narrative analysis.³³⁴

9.5.2. Integrated Narrative Through Conversion Stages – Narrative Analysis Charts

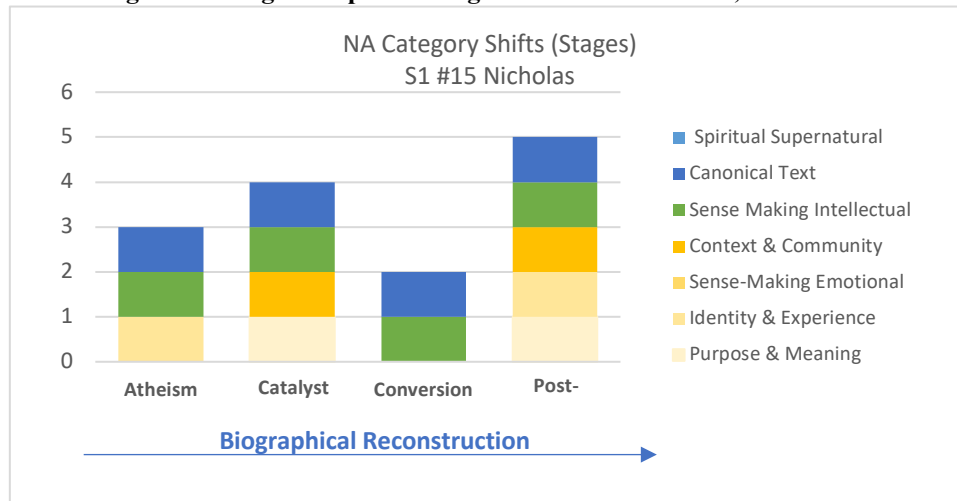
In order to visually represent influence and integration (or lack of integration) of Substance and Function variables throughout analyzed conversion stories, two charts were produced: 1) Model compliant: vertical top-to-bottom direction from pre-conversion to post-conversion, and 2) Stage compliant: horizontal left-to-right direction from pre-conversion to post-conversion. Nicholas's charts demonstrate an integration of influences through which both Substance and Function variables were present before, during, and after conversion. This finding is important in light of Nicholas' conversion pattern characterized as leaning strongly towards (SI) intellectual sense-making.



³³³ See Appendix: Integrated Narrative Analysis Memo, Christopher.

³³⁴ Due to the length of each narrative analysis (15-20 pages per story), they are not included in the Appendix but are available in electronic form upon request.

Figure 41. Stage Compliant Integrated Narrative Chart, S1 Nicholas



To provide a brief narrative reference, his self-written conversion story is presented here:

Table 43. Integrated Influences: Written Emic Narrative, S1 Nicholas

S1 32yo male	PRE-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE	CHANGING META-NARRATIVE	CONVERSION NARRATIVE	POST-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE
	[Creation]	[Fall]	[Redemption]	[Restoration]
	Atheist Stage	Catalyst Stage	Conversion Stage	Post-Conversion Stage
Narrative Embodied	Q32. Please provide a brief summary of your conversion from Atheism to Christianity.			
Emic Perspective [survey story]	<p>Participation Date: 9/29/2014</p> <p>PRE-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE [Creation – understanding where we came from]</p> <p>My Mother has always been LDS and encouraged her children (3 total) to become LDS as well. My Father used to be Christian (Lutheran) and encouraged us to become Christian. All through my childhood, the kids would switch-off going to church with one parent one week, then the other parent the next week. When I was 14, I decided God didn't exist and stopped going to church all-together. When I was 16, my Father became a full-blown Atheist, and has since then become an agnostic -- which had some influence on my Atheistic beliefs. My Uncle has his PhD in theology from the University of Oxford. He had never pressured me or engaged me in religious discussion unless I asked.</p> <p>CATALYST [Fall – understanding where we are]</p> <p>One day, I asked him to recommend a book on what he thinks the best HISTORICAL evidence for Christ's death and resurrection was. For the life of me, I can't remember the book title -- I just know that after I read it, my entire world of Atheism came crashing down. As an Atheist, I no longer had a 'rational' argument for why Christ couldn't have resurrected. Now, I found myself using making-up reasons why the resurrection couldn't be true -- sometimes coming-up with bizarre theories to explain why people claimed to have seen Christ resurrected (Christ had a twin brother, Christ faked his death, etc.).</p> <p>CONVERSION [Redemption – understanding what we have become]</p>			

	<p>Eventually, I realized I wasn't accepting the evidence rationally. I prayed... and became Christian. My journey to Christianity was 99% logical, rather than emotional. I needed to 'feel' like my Christian beliefs had 'real world' application and made sense logically/rationally.</p> <p>POST-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE [Restoration – understanding what we are becoming / will become]</p>
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By comparison, Barbara’s conversion pattern is F1, the strongest Function Catalyst narrative from the Sample Group, yet it shows integration of variables across conversion. Barbara’s story highlights predominantly Function influences at Atheist and Catalyst Stages, although Substance elements came into play at the Conversion and Post-Conversion Stages.

Figure 42. Model Compliant Integrated Narrative Chart, F1, Barbara

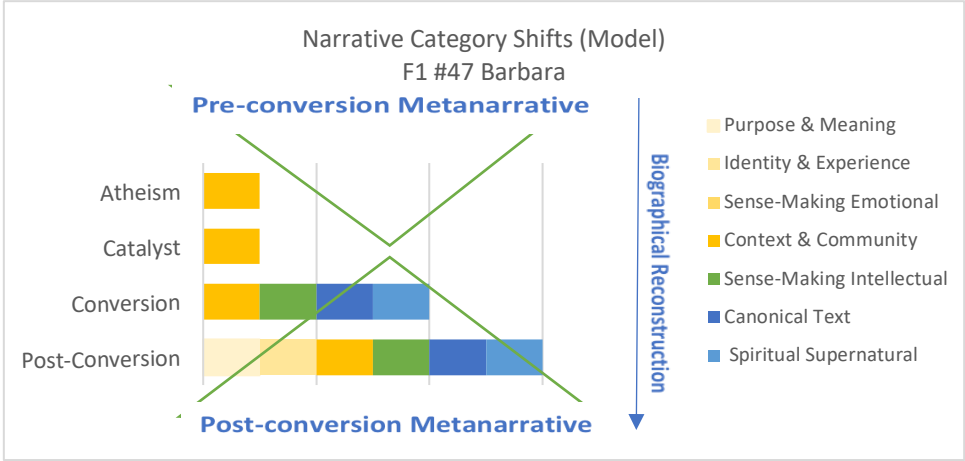
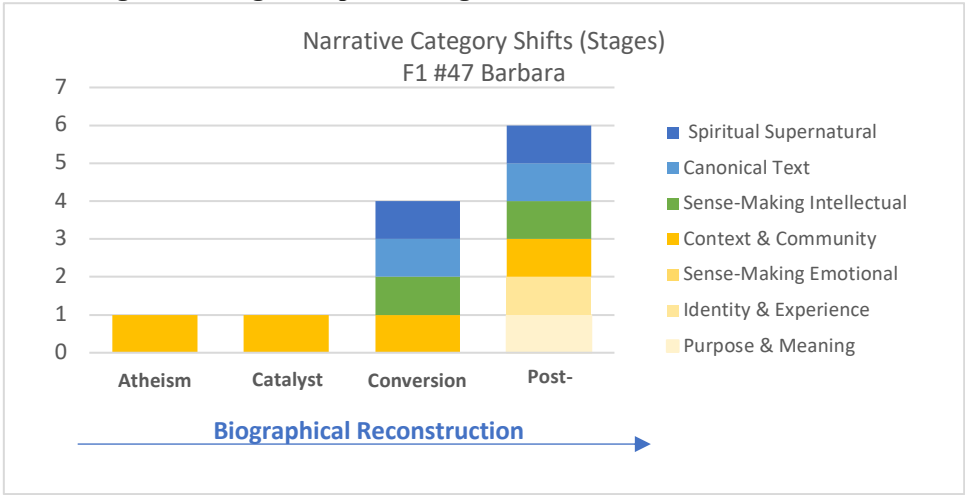


Figure 43. Stage Compliant Integrated Narrative Chart, F1, Barbara



Her abbreviated self-written survey narrative is as follows:

Table 44. Integrated Influences: Written Emic Narrative, F1 Barbara

F1 Barbara 70yo female	PRE-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE	CHANGING META-NARRATIVE	CONVERSION NARRATIVE	POST-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE
	[Creation]	[Fall]	[Redemption]	[Restoration]
	Atheist Stage	Catalyst Stage	Conversion Stage	Post-Conversion Stage
Narrative Embodied	Q32. Please provide a brief summary of your conversion from Atheism to Christianity. Participation Time: 1/12/2015 13:37			
Emic Perspective [survey story]	<p>PRE-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE [Creation – understanding where we came from]</p> <p>I grew up in a home in which we all went to church, claimed many Christian beliefs & practices and where most people around us did the same thing. (Greeley, Colo.) However, we weren't encouraged to study the Bible, invite others to church, or deepen or share our faith in any way. At 18 I went off to college (Univ. of Colo.) and was exposed to other beliefs and worldviews. Although I joined a Methodist sorority, this was a time when churches were becoming more liberal and it became fashionable to claim little or no belief in God. As a nursing major, I studied various science & social science courses & did lots of reading. By 19, many of my childhood beliefs & practices seemed irrelevant.</p> <p>At 20 I married a young man whom I met at a nearby Air Force base. (in Denver) If I hadn't done that my 'social consciousness' was 'raised' to where I might have gone to Alabama that summer to register black people to vote! The hippie movement & other causes were just beginning on my campus.... We moved to Calif. and had 2 sons. We continued an Atheistic life style, barely even recognizing Easter or Christmas! During that time, I had little exposure to Christians or Christianity. I remember attending a church service with some friends & later had a Christian friend who was more outspoken about her faith & told me she was praying for me.</p> <p>For our last 2 years there, we were part of a humanist group called Creative Initiative Foundation which believed in the acceptance of ALL major world religions! (I don't know if it ever spread from the San Francisco Bay area.) We were also caught up in the emerging environmental movement...</p> <p>CATALYST [Fall – understanding where we are] After 10 years, we moved to Georgia (where we still live, in a different part of Metro Atlanta) & into a new subdivision near a new & growing church. My sons had been to church with some friends in Cal., so asked to go in GA.!</p> <p>CONVERSION [Redemption – understanding what we have become] Through the preaching of God's WORD, friendship of some people & Bible study, I accepted Jesus as Savior in 1975!</p> <p>POST-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE [Restoration – understanding what we are becoming / will become]</p>			

Importantly, even these 'extremes' of Substance Catalyst (Nicholas) and Function Catalyst (Barbara) narratives demonstrate incorporation of both Function and Substance influences in the conversion process. Every conversion narrative within the sample group

without exception displayed an inclusive profile. No story portrayed conversion for Function or Substance only reasons. That is, conversion stories consistently exhibited a combination of Function and Substance variables, although unique to each individual. The results confirmed not whether both Substance and Function influences were evident, but when and in what particular form throughout the conversion process. Examination of all biographical reconstruction patterns among the sample group yielded another prevalent finding. Through the conversion process, integration of Substance and Function variables increased over time. That is, the highest integration of mixed variables was consistently observed at the Post-Conversion Stage. Further, these findings validate the proposed Narrative Analysis for Religious Conversion model as a viable framework for analysis of conversion stories.

9.6. Narrative Analysis Conclusion

Narrative analysis of religious conversion narratives within a narrowed population of educated Atheists to Christianity strongly confirms 1) the biographical reconstruction of individuals through religious conversion as they change from personal embodiment of pre-conversion meta-narrative to post-conversion narrative, 2) the evident relationship between the converts' believed meta-narrative story and their individual embodied story as seen in their language of belief, experience, and expression 3) the integrated nature of Substance and Function variables in the conversion process, most prominently at the Post-Conversion Stage, and 4) the agreement with prior mixed-method data analysis in this study. The correlation of particular variables was not assessed, but observations as to these findings, narrative themes, and implications will be discussed in the next chapter.

PART THREE: DISCUSSION

10.0. TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED VIEW OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IN AN INTELLECTUAL POPULATION

10.1. Introduction

In light of the demands of 'thick' religious conversion - reconsideration of life's biggest questions as well as a new way of living - this thesis sought to determine the matrix of influences causing change. Explored through mixed-method research, a 'bi-focal lens' (Onwuegbuzie 2005), this dual approach addressed the investigator's concerns through quantitative survey and captured the participants' voices through qualitative interview and narrative analyses, resulting in a 'thick' understanding of conversion. Research findings confirmed a positive presence of Substance as combined with Function variables in the conversion of educated Atheists to Christianity. Quantitative (survey) outcomes were substantiated by Qualitative (interview) and Narrative Analysis findings. Despite diverse conversion patterns, every convert demonstrated the presence of both Function and Substance elements in their conversion stories. Confirmation of conversion was consistently seen through biographical reconstruction as converts began to perceive themselves within and embody their new meta-narrative.

Specifically, in response to thesis questions A1-2, this research sought to determine the extent to which the academic literature addressed description, conception, modeling, and methodological assessment of religious conversion. In response to proposed thesis questions B1, this research sought to determine the presence, role, and timing Substance ('what religion is') plays, if any, in informing an intellectual population's Atheism, catalyst towards change, and/or conversion to Christianity. Similarly, the study investigated presence, role, and timing of Function ('what religion does') in conversion, and whether functional influences serve as sole precipitators as the literature suggests or whether both Substance and Function play critical roles in the resignation of one worldview and the adaptation of another. Narrative analysis was conducted in order to appreciate the embodied nature of biographical

reconstruction in the converts' lives through changing and embracing a contrasting, new metanarrative. This research, aligned with Gooren's (2010, pp. 16-17) approach, investigated oral life and religious histories as well as 'the puzzle of the individual conversion: what were the main factors that influenced it and how were these factors interconnected?' This chapter will discuss the major research findings and their relationship to the academic literature as well as potential implications towards future considerations of definition, conceptualization, modeling and research method in religious conversion.

10.2. Major Findings Point Towards an Integrated View of Conversion.

The major findings of this research project positively affirmed the presence of Substance along with Function as jointly instrumental for a narrowly targeted group of naturalistic Atheists converting to Christianity. Quantitative survey and qualitative interview analyses were conducted at three phases of the conversion process including Atheist Stage, Catalyst Stage, and Conversion Stage. Levels of Function and Substance were assessed at each stage to determine their respective and integrative presence. Consequences of conversion as well as post-conversion substantive influence were considered as part of the conversion process. These findings support an inclusive view of religious conversion, substantiating the need for considering Substance Intellectual (SI) and Spiritual Experiential (SE) factors in the conversion process.

10.2.1. The Atheist Stage, Jointly Informed by Substance and Function

This group of Atheists self-identified as intellectual, educated individuals who valued the credibility of their held beliefs. They provided rational reasons for substantiating their worldview, as compliant with the literature (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, Kanazawa, 2010, Cragun, 2013 & 2015, Yancey, 2013, Keysar and Navarro-Rivera 2013, Steib and Klein, 2018, Beit-Hallahmi, 2018). Most affiliated with a form of Scientific Atheism rather than a Humanistic Atheism (LeDrew, 2012). However, their narratives also revealed non-rational, functional 'reasons' as informing their Atheism. This finding affirms scholars (Caldwell-Harris, 2011, Smith, 2011, Zuckerman, 2011, Catto and Eccles, 2013, Farias,

2013, Lee, 2013, LeDrew 2013, Bradley, 2014, Greksa, 2015, and Ruse 2015) who contend for a broadened understanding of and approach to Atheism as including both rational and non-rational influences. Importantly, academic scholarship increasingly acknowledges multiple ‘precursors’ and ‘pathways’ towards Atheism, ‘experiences’ with Atheism, and ‘identities’ as Atheists (Greksa, 2015). There is no simple, single cause and effect nature of belief. Rather, a realistic view of embodied belief appreciates its multi-dimensional, dynamic nature. Naturalistic Atheism is no exception. Scholars recognize its heterogeneous nature and are allowing room to explore its varied causes and presentations. In attempting to ‘understand where the Atheist comes from’, this research confirms this positive academic direction in finding multiple influences shaping Atheistic belief.

According to this research, disbelief in God was informed by both Function and Substance motivations according to the survey, interview, and narrative analysis assessment of converted Atheists. On survey assessment, Substance variables prompting disbelief occurred at a higher rate (ranged from 20%-60%) than Function variables (ranged from 16%-50%). Survey inquiry also revealed an interesting finding regarding the nature of disbelief. Subjects were queried as to primary reasons for Atheism ‘as an Atheist’ and ‘as a Christian looking back.’ Primary reasons given ‘as an Atheist’ for Atheism were mixed (Q13: Substance only 12%; Function only 4%; both Substance and Function 84%). However, ‘as a Christian looking back,’ primary reasons for Atheism shifted towards increased Function influences, although most subjects reported mixed motivations (Q24: Substance only 14%; Function only 25%; Both Substance and Function 61%). This difference was not surprising in light of the rising socio-cultural pressure against religious belief as antiquated superstition and the need to self-justify ‘as an Atheist’ through rational, substantive means. Whereas, ‘as a Christian’ the need for justifying Atheism was no longer useful or necessary; therefore, motivations revealed greater functional sway than was prior admitted.³³⁵ In this study,

³³⁵ The principal investigator appreciates this changed post-conversion perspective/insight may be disputed due to the effect of the biographical reconstruction of events in light of converts’ adoption of a new paradigm.

Function (socio-cultural/context and community, identity, experience, emotional sense-making, and purpose and meaning elements) and Substance (intellectual sense-making and perceived lack of spiritual reality) elements combined to form embodied belief in the pre-conversion meta-narrative of naturalistic Atheism. Only one subject demonstrated a Function-only pattern at the Atheist Stage.

Statistical analysis using Repeated-Measures ANOVA for the survey measure demonstrated the presence of Substance as primary (27/50; 54.0%), slightly higher than Function (24/50; 48%) at the Atheist Stage. Significant differences were found at the Atheist Stage ($p = .040$) denoting a pattern of Substantive Intellectual averages as higher than Spiritual Experiential. This finding cohered with the dominant rational, intellectual rationale typically offered by Atheists as grounding their worldview, a lack of belief in supernatural reality. A higher level of Substance variables was instrumental in the formation of disbelief, although only slightly higher than Function elements. Both Substance and Function influences motivated baseline belief at the Atheist Stage.

Narrative analysis of interviews at the Atheist Stage confirmed integrated themes as contributing to converts' pre-conversion meta-narrative. The Pre-conversion Meta-Narrative 'stage' signifies the convert's embodied pre-conversion ideology. Attitudes towards religious and/or alternative belief ranged from heightened emotional resistance against religious belief to an apathy or desire towards religious belief. Baseline pre-conversion perspectives are contextually informed by presence and potential integration of Functional and/or Substantive variables serving to reinforce contrary or open perspective(s) to (new) religious belief and/or conversion. Pre-conversion perspectives were determined through expressed language, text, and embodied living. These perspectives informed purpose and meaning, self-identity, experience, intellectual and emotional sense-making, as well as community belonging. Individual stories were grounded within the larger meta-narrative story, developing over time with ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation. During narrative analysis, themes emerged

through language coding corresponding to the categories from the Narrative Analysis Model for Religious Conversion. Common yet varied narrative themes were present among Atheists:

Table 45. Atheist Stage Narrative Themes

ATHEIST STAGE	PRE-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE THEMES			
FUNCTION				
Context and Community	Autonomous Atheist	Active, direct exposure to Christians and Christianity		Minimal or no exposure to Christians and Christianity
	Atheist in community	Rejection of socio-cultural religious community		Socio-cultural negative messaging regarding Christians/Christianity
Atheist Identity	Skeptical	Intelligent	Autonomous	Prideful
	Moral	Immoral	Rebellious	‘Blind’
Life Experience	Positive Life experience	Negative Life experience	Busy, non-contemplative	Hedonistic
Experience with religion and/or religious people	Positive experience	Negative experience	Limited Experience	Nominal Christianity – no observed practical difference
Sense-Making Emotional	Contempt towards God, Christians	Happy, Emotionally content		Emotional alienation and fear
	Apathetic or not angry towards God, Christians	Depression loss of happiness		Painful emotional experiences causing doubt, distrust of God
Purpose and Meaning	Enjoying autonomy; Self-purposed	Positive outlook, Existentially satisfied		Purposed living in goals and movements
	Sober-minded outlook; Considers deep questions	Troubled about existential issues; emptiness		Purposed towards demeaning Christians
Personal Will and Desire	Open to God but untrue; intellectual	Closed to God; Volitional will	Closed to God; Socio-cultural	Closed to God; Emotional
	Open to spirituality but not Christianity			
SUBSTANCE				
Sense-Making Intellectual	Presumed, unexamined Atheist belief	Christianity is unscientific	Socio-cultural and academic contexts reinforced Atheism	Christians could not provide good answers
	Thoughtful examination of Atheist beliefs and implications	Christianity is anti-intellectual, irrational, myth, human origin	Uninformed in Christian beliefs	Pain/suffering in the world does not cohere with God’s existence
Text	Believing naturalistic Atheism texts	Disproving Christian text	Outside of the Christian text	Lack of exposure or negative exposure to Christian text
Spiritual	Active religious background	Minimal / no exposure to religious belief	Testing God; lack of evidence for God	Dark spiritual experiences; Dark ‘internal blackness’
	Nominal childhood belief in God	Rejecting God; negative attitude towards religion	Doubting God; unanswered prayer	Spiritual curiosity

Based upon the presence of varied themes informing the Atheist Stage, the question at hand becomes whether or not the multi-dimensionality of Atheistic belief remained present as the convert begins to move in a different direction.

10.2.2. The Catalyst Stage, Function as Primary Influence

Within this research, the majority (two-thirds) held a strong resistance to the Christian meta-narrative and lacked desire towards change, although most reached a point at which they moved from ‘closed’ towards an ‘open’ volitional will due to a catalyst. At the Catalyst Stage, converts’ interest began to open towards the viability of spiritual reality, God, and Christianity. Survey and interview responses reflected a variety of Function and Substance reasons prompting openness and inquiry towards religious belief. Crisis-driven catalysts included acute event(s) or prolonged negative experience(s) producing psycho-emotional and/or cognitive dissonance. Crisis-borne catalysts partially confirm scholarship regarding sudden movement towards conversion (Lofland and Stark, 1965, Richardson, 1977, Rambo, 1993). Other gradual non-crisis-based catalysts were also reported, confirming variety of conversion motifs and types (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981, Kilbourne and Richardson, 1989, Gooren, 2007/2010, Rambo 2010). Examples of non-crisis catalysts include positive social interaction with a Christian and/or to satisfy a significant social relationship, desire for belonging and/or deeper personal satisfaction, value and/or purpose, intellectual curiosity or challenge, attempts towards disproving Christianity, or responding to a positive religious experience.³³⁶

For the majority of cases, survey and interview results upheld sociological literature consensus declaring Function’s primary role at the Catalyst Stage. Stronger ‘Function only’ Catalyst factors were present in interview analysis (71%) as compared to surveys (33%).³³⁷

³³⁶ See SoGoSurvey, Questions 17, 18, and 23 as those providing Catalyst response options and which were also used in descriptive as well as quantitative analysis, located in Appendices 10.4.

³³⁷ Although the primacy of Function as catalyst was not questioned through both of these measures, the degree of difference between the two tools was best explained by the extensive questioning borne through the survey as compared to the semi-structured interviews which may not have tapped into the depth and breadth of functional influences assessed in the quantitative structured survey.

When Function and Substance factors were combined, the percentage of Functional involvement remained strong in survey and interview tools (82% and 89% respectively).³³⁸ Patterns of religious conversion, as developed through interview narratives, yielded ‘Function Catalyst’ patterns (86.0%) as dominant over ‘Substance Catalyst’ patterns (16.0%).³³⁹ Those subjects who reported ‘Substance only’ Catalysts shared a comparable minor role in both survey (10%) and interviews (8%). When combined with Function, the role of Substance bore twice greater influence in surveys (59%) than in the interviews (26%).³⁴⁰

Despite robust presence of Function at the Catalyst Stage through descriptive analyses, the presence of Function over Substance did not reach significance in statistical testing.³⁴¹ Nearly two-thirds of subjects (33/50; 66.0%) yielded Substance Catalysts as higher than Function on Repeated-Measures ANOVA. Conversely, approximately one-third of subjects (18/50; 36%) scored Function Catalysts as higher than Substance. Despite this finding, a paired-sample t-test showed no significant difference between Atheism and Catalyst Stages in demonstrating Substance over Function. This lack of significance was mostly likely due to the moderate spread found in both positive and negative scores, producing a cancelling effect. Regardless, whether Function is primary at the Catalyst Stage, as in the case of descriptive survey and interview findings, or whether Substance is primary, as the statistical analysis showed, all measures demonstrably confirmed positive presence and

³³⁸ Eighty-two percent (82%) in survey measures derived from 33% Function only + 49% Function and Substance. Eighty-nine percent (89%) in interviews derived from 71% Function only + 18% both Function and Substance.

³³⁹ Based upon interview data, four (4) Substance Primary Religious Conversion Patterns were developed. (‘Function-Catalyst’ or ‘Substance-Catalyst’ indicated the temporal primacy of Substance and/or Function as Catalyst in the religious conversion process rather than its dominance throughout the conversion process). A total of 8/50; 16.0% demonstrated a Substance Catalyst conversion pattern. Alternatively, five (5) Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Patterns emerged including a total of 43/50 subjects, 86.0% in total. See Chapter 6. Qualitative Research Findings – Religious Conversion Patterns; 6.2. Substance Primary Religious Conversion Patterns and Function Primary Religious Conversion Patterns for full description and findings.

³⁴⁰ Substantive influence as Catalyst for surveys derived from 10% ‘Substance only’ plus 49% Substance and Function ‘both’ combined = 59%. On Survey, Spiritual Experiential (SE) also served as Catalyst within the Substantive category: seven respondents (7/50; 13.74%; Q18) reported they began asking questions about Christianity in order to ‘respond to a religious/mystical experience’; one subject (1/50; 2.0%; Q18) reported a ‘dream or vision’ spurred inquiry about Christianity. For interviews, Substantive influence as Catalyst derived from 8% ‘Substance only’ plus 18% both Function and Substance = 26%.

³⁴¹ See Chapter 7, Quantitative Inferential Analysis, 7.2.2. Comparison of Substance and Function at Three Time Points, Repeated Measures ANOVA.

role Substance in producing openness towards religious belief either in combination with Function or as sole precipitator.

Narrative analysis at the Catalyst Stage revealed changes in the converts' lives prompting them towards reconsideration of spirituality and the possible reality of God. Respondent stories demonstrated an increased awareness of personal condition (intellectually, experientially, emotionally, existentially, spiritually) brought to the surface through changing or eventful circumstances. For many in this study, changes in context and community, life experience, satisfaction, perspective, and/or relationships prompted an open yet cautious skepticism towards religious belief. Conflict in Atheist implicit and explicit beliefs caused cognitive and emotional dissonance for some prompted reconsideration of and dissatisfaction with Atheism (Bering 2010, Lanman, 2013). For others, the disdain for God and Christianity propelled them towards active refutation and disproval. Converts moved towards conversion through positive or negative motivations, 'God-orchestrated' reasons, or through surprising, favorable encounters with Christians and Christianity. In this research, conversion narratives uncovered the means and manner whereby converts became open towards shifting and reinterpreting their lives in the context of a new master story.

Catalyst Stage narrative themes emerged (through coding) in every area of Function and Substance as reflected in the following chart:

Table 46. Catalyst Stage Narrative Themes

CATALYST STAGE	CHANGING META-NARRATIVE THEMES			
FUNCTION				
Context and Community	New context and community	Breakdown of negative stereotypes of Christians and Christianity		Begin active engagement with religious community
	Positive interactions with Christians, experientially, relationally	Positive interactions with Christians, intellectually		Independent search and study
Changing Identity	Skeptical	Intelligent	Autonomous	Prideful
	Moral	Immoral		
Life Experience	Positive event or experience	Negative event or experience	Life or relationship change	Contemplative, searching for answers

Experience with religion and/or religious people	Favorable Interactions with Christians, experientially, intellectually	Breakdown of negative stereotypes of Christians and Christianity	Encountered authentic embodied form of Christianity	Challenged by genuine, intelligent Christians, Christianity
Sense-Making Emotional	Contempt towards God, Christians lessens	Emotionally painful event or experience	Feel valued by genuine, caring Christians	
	Mixed emotions in considering Christianity	Depression, regret, loss of happiness	Emotional connection to Christian literature, beauty	
Purpose and Meaning	Fatigued of hedonism	Sober mindedness and deep reflection prompts searching	Changed view about life purpose	
	Existential dissatisfaction prompts searching	Conflict with moral freedom and moral knowledge	Purposed towards disproving Christianity	
Personal Will and Desire	Approach/avoidance, skeptical openness	Open to spirituality generally	Open to God and Christianity	Active searching; willing to follow the evidence
			Still closed, attempt to disprove	
SUBSTANCE				
Sense-Making Intellectual	Intellectual quest; comparing religions; becoming informed	Disappointment with Atheist arguments	Interaction with informed Christians	Active study either independently or with others
	Commitment to truth, following the evidence	Cognitive dissonance causes questioning	Christianity makes intellectual sense	Embodied Christianity makes sense
Text	Hearing, reading, studying, comparing religious texts, bible	Attempting to disprove religious texts, the bible	Hearing reading, studying Christian apologetics	Believing the text of the bible as true
Spiritual	Spiritual openness	Sensed God ‘moving’ them towards conversion	Spiritual experience prior to conversion	Heard, read the gospel; talked with minister
	Prayed to God	Providential encounters	Began reading the bible, attending church	Others praying for them

Movement towards spiritual openness, change, and belief does not ensure conversion will occur. The change or challenge is often the beginning of turning towards resolution of the existing conflict. In narrative terms, the protagonist must move forward towards resolution, willing to confront developing issues, to become open towards transformation. Heirich (1977) understood the 'radical reorientation of religious understandings of God, personal behavior, accepting new beliefs, and continuing religious questing' required of converts. Similarly, the Catalyst Stage serves as an entry point into the changing narrative brought about through inner, personal, and extra-personal conflicts in McKee's (1997) story formulation. The protagonist faces challenges, seeks guidance, reaches a point of decision

and response. Likewise, this ‘middle’ destabilizing period causes the convert to reevaluate his/her own story, to seek clarifying and satisfying answers, to consider new ways of thinking and living within another meta-narrative, and to visualize a new embodied and supernatural reality - within this context, Christianity.

10.2.3. The Conversion Stage, Substance as Primary Influence

While the Catalyst Stage revealed many interacting narrative themes working to produce openness and change, narrative analysis of the Conversion Stage yielded a different profile. Fewer themes were identified among convert narratives once they moved towards conversion. In narrative structure, the protagonist moves from tension or crisis point towards resolution. Through conversion, internal conflicts are resolved, a decisive life change is made as converts surrender to the truth of the new meta-narrative. Converts then move towards personal transformation and commitment, living within the new story. Self-understanding of identity, purpose, value, meaning, belonging, sense-making, and spirituality become reconciled and re-interpreted within the new master narrative.

Within this research, Conversion Stage narrative themes expressed intentional movement towards the Christian story with language of openness, surrender, sense-making, and spirituality for some and uneasy progression for others. Themes of ‘Redemption’ surface (‘saved’, ‘chosen’, ‘belief’, ‘accepting Jesus’) surfaced in their stories:

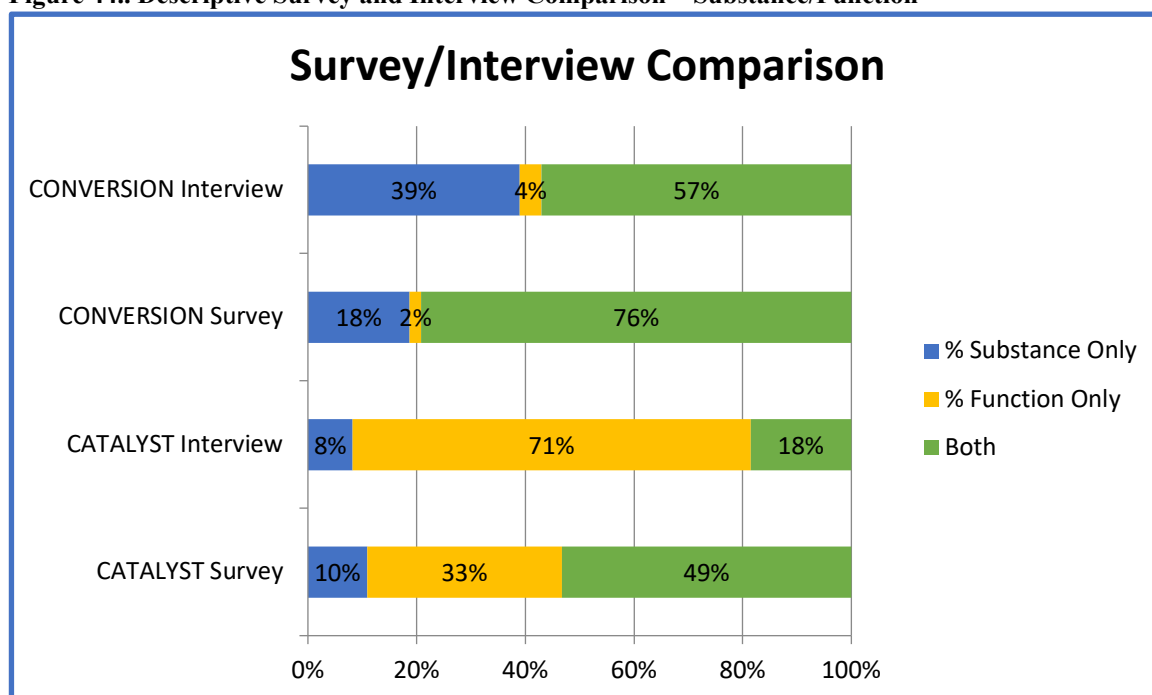
Table 47. Conversion Stage Narrative Themes

CONVERSION STAGE	CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE THEMES			
	Christian Metanarrative: ‘Redemption’ – understanding what we have become			
FUNCTION				
Context and Community	Church attendance, teaching, ‘hear the gospel’	Begin active engagement with religious community	No church attendance or belonging during conversion	Independent search and study
Christian Identity	Saved	Chosen	Humbled	Christian
Life Experience	Immediate positive life change		Release from addictions	
Experience with religion and/or religious people	Favorable Interactions with Christians, experientially, intellectually		Breakdown of negative stereotypes of Christians and Christianity	

Sense-Making Emotional	Worry and fear of family rejection, choosing wrongly		Releasing anger, open to God	
Purpose and Meaning	Surrendering ‘my will’ to ‘God’s will’			
Personal Will and Desire	Open, Giving my life to God		Surrendering ‘my will’ to ‘God’s will’	
SUBSTANCE				
Sense-Making Intellectual	Christianity makes intellectual sense	Ease in believing Christianity	Conversion more than intellectual belief	Active study either independently or with others
	Continued skepticism and resistance	Long process of coming to believe Christianity as true	Frustration at lack of pre-conversion exposure to credibility of Christian worldview	
Text	Reading the text, bible	Believing the text	The text reading me	Use text language
Spiritual	Bible reading prompted conversion	Prayed to God; Accepted Jesus	Spiritual experience with bible reading	Conversion was a ‘work of God’
	Responded to the gospel; understood need for grace and forgiveness	Spiritual experience after prayer	Spiritual experience with conversion	Convicted, convinced Christianity was true

In survey and interview descriptive analyses, Substance of belief was reported to be an essential element of the Conversion Stage for the majority of converts. Belief in the reality of God's existence was affirmed through Substance Intellectual (SI), Spiritual Experiential (SEe and/or SEi) variables or both. Interview and survey data mutually supported the dual, integrated presence of Substance and Function, although at varying levels. While Function motivations were most influential at the Catalyst Stage, Substance increased, and the primacy of Function decreased at the Conversion Stage. Importantly, the integration of Function and Substance elements strengthened at the Conversion Stage. Survey data confirmed 94% of participants included Substance as a viable part of conversion; interview data demonstrated a comparable 96% who considered Substance as an influential part of their conversion process (when 'Substance Only' and 'Both' (Substance with Function) are included). The overwhelming majority of participants (49/50) affirmed Substance (in addition to or absent of Functional influence) as constituent in the conversion process, particularly at the Conversion Stage.

Figure 44.. Descriptive Survey and Interview Comparison – Substance/Function



Substance and Function mutually reinforced the truths of Christianity and served as convincing motivators towards Conversion. Statistical analysis of survey data confirmed a significant increase of Substance over Function at the Conversion Stage. Demographic variables of gender, education, geographical location, and strength of Atheism yielded no significant findings. On age and years-post-conversion, findings suggested younger people endorse more Substance items than older people.

Subjects in this research reported Substance of belief as critically important because acceptance of the Christian worldview required sufficient, justified warrant prior to and/or in order to convert. Many participants expressed the need for grounding ‘true belief’. Greg stated, ‘If Christianity was true, I had to know it was absolutely true in my mind from an intellectual point of view because I was so wary of being self-deceived that I wanted to have every question answered basically.’ Daniel clarified substantive truth as more important than functional benefits of religious belief:

It doesn’t matter whether it makes you feel happy or makes you feel good or anything else. It matters if it is true and that is all that matters...Nothing else matters. Everything else is a secondary consideration...[my] worldview has changed, but that desire for living for what is true remains.

Amanda spoke of the necessity of substantive truth in light of conversion:

I would say at bottom, I had a commitment to truth. [Pre-conversion] I didn't believe in Christianity because I didn't believe it was true. I didn't have a dysfunctional childhood or had some bad experiences. It was because I literally just didn't think it was true. I wanted to believe what was true. And so, when it became clear that I was in error [about my Atheistic worldview], I accepted it. It was humbling and unpleasant, but I would still accept it.

Converts maintained that truth grounding Christianity was critical because of the demands and consequences. Affirmation and acceptance of belief content presumed a required devotion of life - not merely a change of worldview but a change of an individual's 'whole world'. Within the context of this research, participants viewed religious conversion as entailing a conversion of life. Christopher explained:

It is a tumultuous thing to change your entire worldview. It's like stepping into another world because the way you perceive everything changes. So, I understand why people are [reluctant] about wanting to switch their worldview one way or other.

If you go from believing that there's no objective moral duties to believing that there are these duties binding upon you then that's an enormous shift in the way that you think about everything you do or say or think. To go in another direction, I understand that people are cautious about even considering something that potentially change their life that much.

Functional elements also validated Christian truths (such as 'felt' human value, dignity, purpose, free-will, consciousness, personhood, rationality, objective morality - all found justified warrant within the Christian worldview) which could not be grounded within naturalistic Atheism. Beliefs associated the Christian story cohered with and provided good explanatory power for human experience, providing a practical, livable worldview. The overarching 'master story' offered meaning and coherence to thinking and living, provided structure onto which adherents 'reinterpreted their lives' (Milton 2013), 'linked their own lives' (Dufault-Hunter 2012), and 'understood God's work in the world' (Goldberg, 2001). Post-conversion confidence in the truth of the newly held Christian worldview was high.

10.2.4. Post- Conversion Stage, Substance as Primary Influence

Post-conversion, this group of converts demonstrated high commitment level to their new-found faith in Christianity. This strong allegiance may occur due to the enormity of the shift from Atheism to Christianity (socially, emotionally, intellectually), the intellectual

nature of this population prompting careful consideration from skepticism to belief, loss of pre-conversion Atheist community through conversion (for some) and gain of new Christian belonging, finding a worldview that ‘fits’ reality and their human experience and longings, and/or finding deep commitment to and relationship the person of Jesus Christ. Former Atheist Michelle’s life has been fully redirected towards God and God-centered perspective and purposes as ‘everything’. Rebuffing a reductionist form of Christianity, she explains,

American Christianity becomes all about a system in your head, and maybe about managing your emotions. And if it’s that, it’s a lot more susceptible to being dismissed if it’s just an intellectual system. But it’s not. *It’s everything. It’s the way the universe works. There is nothing that is left out of this system. Whether or not is mentioned in the Bible or not it’s all part of our faith. And I think that holistic view, the completeness of it, when someone actually gets that, it’s like “Okay, this makes sense.”*

This is why Christianity is true and not Islam, Judaism is partially true, right, because we are the fulfilment of Judaism, or Buddhism, they all have glimpses of the truth but it’s not just a question of which one I like better. It’s like, “*No, Christ is the Logos. This is the center. This is everything. This is the cosmic system.*” It’s just fantastic, right?

High level of post-conversion commitment was also seen in their embodied view of self-identity as purposed, followers of Christ. This was evidenced in their decisions towards ways of living as ‘genuine’ Christians, continued intellectual and religious study (formal or informal), active involvement in ministry (voluntary or vocational). Their language reflected a sense of ‘whole life’ conversion, and not simply a religious affiliation or church membership. Rather, their worldview shift changed their ‘whole world’.

Post-conversion narrative themes bring to light the transformative nature of conversion. Convert stories reflect the new narrative in which they live meaningfully within the Christian community, text, and story of reality:

Table 48. Post-Conversion Stage Narrative Themes

POST-CONVERSION STAGE	POST-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE THEMES			
	Christian Metanarrative: ‘Restoration’ – understanding what we are becoming / will become			
FUNCTION				
Context and Community	Active engagement with religious community	Family members become Christians		Social ridicule, resistance, estrangement from friends/family
	Active cultural engagement – towards ‘reaching culture’	Active community engagement – towards ‘reaching community’		Acceptance from friends and family
Christian Identity	Christian	Reasoned	Purposed	Humbled
	‘Radical’	Freed	Still skeptical	
Life Experience	Relationships, life decisions, behaviors improved			
Experience with religion and/or religious people	Embodies authentic Christian life in order to counter negative cultural stereotypes		Emulates modeled, genuine faith	
Sense-Making Emotional	Emotional joy and peace despite losing friendships		Holistic understanding of Christianity integrates and explains emotions	
	Change from negative to positive emotions		Anger turned towards Atheistic worldview bias	
Purpose and Meaning	Christian discipling and evangelism	Christian ministry employment or volunteer		Christian teaching, apologetics
	Living an ‘embodied Christian life’	Further education in theology, philosophy, apologetics, ministry		Fulfilling God’s purposes
Personal Will and Desire	Openness to God’s will			
SUBSTANCE				
Sense-Making Intellectual	Views Christianity as a coherent, comprehensive worldview	Believes God is real, Christianity is true and rational	Embodies an informed Christian belief	Difficulty in changing to and embodying new beliefs
	Developed a ‘thinking faith’; Furthered education	Counters ‘anti-intellectual’ Christian stereotypes	Active bible reading, apologetics reading and study	Continued skepticism
Text	Inside the text	Using text language		Transformed by the text
	Believing the text	Living the text		Studying / defending the text
Spiritual	‘Used by God’ in the ‘Kingdom of God’	Supernaturally freed from addictions, depression	Reliance on the Holy Spirit	Following Jesus
	Sustained by God despite periods of doubt	New spiritual view of the world	Post-conversion spiritual experiences	In relationship with Jesus/God

10.2.5. The Transformational Nature of Conversion

The transformational nature of conversion became clear through narrative analysis of language from pre- to post-conversion. Through religious conversion, converts transform as they ‘reconstruct’ their lives when moving from one master story to another. Biographical reconstruction occurs over time as converts’ lives and life stories are transformed towards and through the new meta-narrative. Indicators of conversion include changes in converts’ perspectives, language, commitments and embodiment of the new master story.

Table 49. Biographical Reconstruction summary

BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION		
	Pre-Conversion	Post-Conversion
FUNCTION		
Context and Community	I Atheist or We Atheists to	We Christians
Identity	I/We to	More than I/We
	Heightened self to	Humbled self
Life Experience	Unfavorable or Favorable to	Favorable or More favorable
Experience with Religious People	Unfavorable or Favorable to	Favorable or More favorable
Sense-making Emotional	Anger / Contempt / Tension or Non-angry Atheist’ to	Resolution Christian
Purpose and Meaning	Emptiness to	Satisfaction
	My purposes to	God’s purposes
Personal Will and Desire	Closed or Open to	Open or More open
SUBSTANCE		
Sense-making Intellectual	Conflict to	Resolution
	Uninformed to	Informed
Text	Reading the text to	Text reading me
	Outside the text to	Inside the text
Spiritual	Denial of God to	Belief in God through spiritual experience
	Denial of God to	Belief in God without spiritual experience

In this research, indicators of conversion were observed through converts' discourse as they narrated their stories and 're-narrated' their lives socially (community/context) in identity (spiritual, individual, and group), experience (life, religion, and religious people) sense-making (emotional, intellectual, spiritual), purpose and meaning, as well as volitional will and desire. Patterns of transformation emerged through repetition and redundancy of data until saturation of biographical reconstruction themes occurred in each area. This chart provides a brief summary of the common changes observed among the converts: Examples of converts' language demonstrating transformation in each area is primarily located in the Appendix, secondarily in Chapter 9, Narrative Analysis findings.

10.2.6. Religious Conversion as an Integrated Phenomenon.

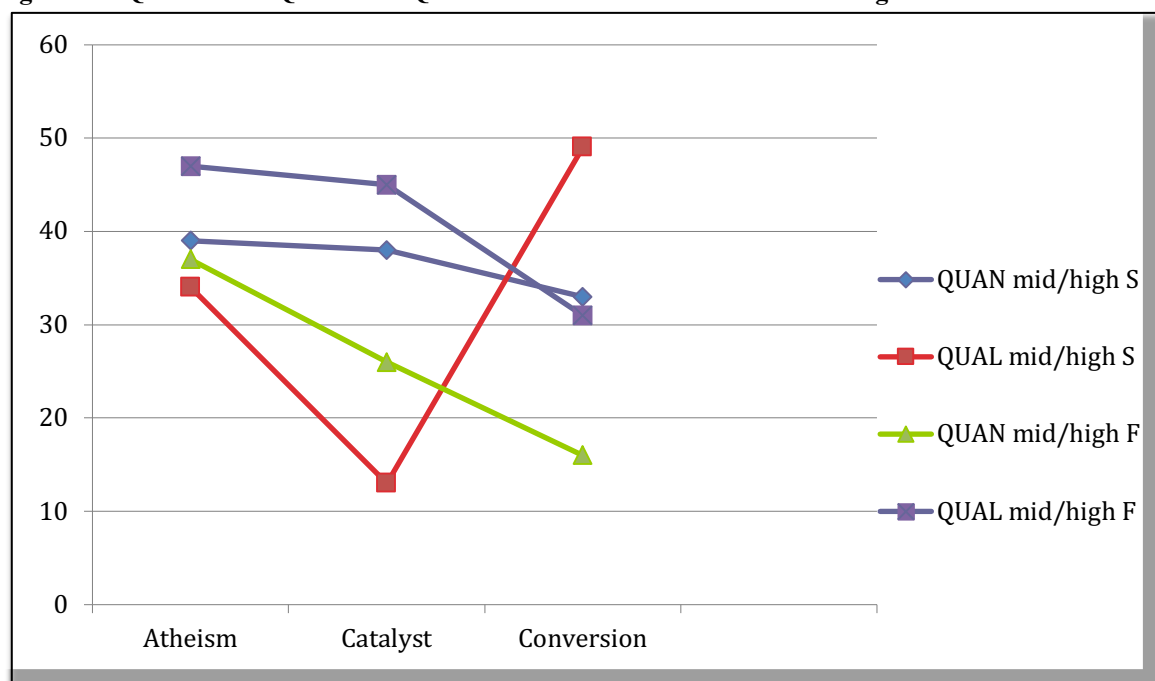
Contemporary literature, particularly Rambo, portrays conversion as a dynamic, multi-dimensional, integrated phenomenon, acknowledging the possibility of divine spiritual experiential influences. Researchers acknowledge various motivations towards conversion, including emotional, cognitive/intellectual, psychological and/or social (Epstein, 1985) diverse motifs of conversion (i.e., intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, coercive; Lofland and Skonovd, 1981) allowing for active seeking, greater variability in process and across cultures and history. However, voices (including Heirich, 1977 and Gooren, 2007) have critiqued religious conversion approaches as fragmented, limited and deterministic rather than multi-dimensional, a social/psychological bias ignoring belief.

This research concurred with classic voices in the social sciences revealing particular aspects of human nature (psycho-emotional) and human experience (cultural, social, experiential), human intellect, and spiritual experience respectively contributive towards religious conversion. However, this research disputes their sole influence as isolated precipitators of conversion and calls for a comprehensive conception of religious conversion, including integration of Function and Substance echoing the voices of a few contemporary social scientists. Just as multiple, diverse functional and substantive influences foster belief formation (such as shown in Atheism), a complex interaction of both influences similarly

evokes belief change. This broadened conception seriously acknowledges the converts' own self-narratives describing the presence and role of Substance as critically important as Function in the process of religious conversion. When research methodology, such as found in this project, allowed for investigation of Function and Substance motivations, study findings confirmed an inclusive presence and role of both Function and Substance throughout the process of religious conversion. This was demonstrated through integrated narrative analysis coding, memos, pattern charts, and biographical reconstruction trends, including language and embodiment of new meta-narrative.

Triangulation of mixed-method data through statistics was performed in order to determine validation (i.e., convergence, inconsistency, or contradiction) of qualitative and quantitative findings (Bazeley, 2013). Quantitative by Qualitative Cross-Tabulations were conducted analyzing Quadrants for Atheism, Catalyst, and Conversion time points and across stages. Overall, triangulated analysis confirmed a positive role for both Substance and Function of belief in the conversion in all phases of belief, varying at different stages. While Function participated in the conversion process, particularly at the Catalyst Stage, statistics confirmed Substance as more substantial than Function at the Conversion Stage:

Figure 45. Quantitative/Qualitative Quadrant Cross-Tab Results: Across Stages.



At the Conversion Stage, both quantitative and qualitative measures demonstrated high levels of Substance as a critical component towards religious conversion of Atheists to Christianity. While convergence was observed at the Atheism and Conversion Stages, inconsistency was noted at the Catalyst Stage. These triangulated findings confirmed a consistent, robust presence and positive influence of Substance of belief, particularly at the Atheism and Conversion Stages. Thus, findings from this mixed-method research are consistent with social science theorists and researchers' admonitions towards a comprehensive integration of factors informing religious conversion. Within this study, respondents stressed their inability to believe apart from substantive warrant. However, functional influences also played strong roles towards allowing contrary or complacent individuals to move from closed to open willingness towards serious consideration of religious belief. Further, positive functional benefits from belief served as a strong supportive role towards conversion.

10.3. Relationship of Research Findings to the Academic Literature.

As established in the first chapter, a functional approach to religious conversion dominates conversion literature despite mention of spiritual and intellectual components. This section addresses particular points of agreement and/or disagreement relative to conversion literature. Contemporary motif and process models are compared to this study's outcomes for analysis. Finally, significance and implications of research findings are discussed in light of consistency with or departure from the literature.

10.3.1. Comparison of Contemporary Research - Atheist Conversion to Christianity.

Major findings obtained within this research generally agree with Langton's (2019) thematic study of Atheist conversion to Christianity regarding the integrated nature of religious conversion as well as the positive inclusion of Substance variable of intellectual and spiritual experiential components. Nearly-identical percentages of Substance themes (Intellectualism, Numinous Experiences) as well as Function themes (Authentic Example, Contra-Atheism) were observed in both studies. In 111 online conversion narratives

Langston found high individual variability of influences, although with ten major recurring themes as contributing towards conversion:

Table 50. Atheist Conversion Research Comparison Summary

RESEARCH COMPARISON Atheist Conversion to Christianity – Thematic Analysis				
	Langston et al. 2019 111 online narratives		Harmon 2019 50 surveys/interviews	
1	Ritual Behaviors (prayer, church attendance, reading the bible)	53%	Religious Activities (church attendance)	12% (Q23)
2	Intellectualism (study of philosophy, science, apologetics)	50%	Substance Intellectual	50% (Q23)
3	Numinous Experiences (mysterious supernatural events, inexplicable events)	45%	Spiritual Experience	44% (Q29)
4	Social Ties (interpersonal influences and relationships)	44%	Social interaction	20% (Q18)
5	Hardship (negative life circumstances)	39%	Personal Life Crisis	16% (18) 18% (Q23)
6	Un-/Pseudo familiarity with Christianity or Christians (negative/ambiguous preconceptions diffused)	33%	Positive Experience with Religious People	38% (Q29)
7	Openness to Experience (willingness to consider Christian truth)	30%	Open Willingness	38%-48% (Q23, 29)
8	Authentic Example (interpersonal experiences of authentic Christians)	28%	Loving actions of Christians	24%-32% (Q23, 29)
9	Religious Study (engaging religious writings, Christian or non-Christian)	25%		[included with Substance Intellectual]
10	Contra Atheism Existential emptiness, purposelessness, despair	24%	Positive emotional consequences , sense of purpose, meaning	22% (18) 26% (Q29)

yellow = Function; green = Substance Intellectual; blue = Spiritual Experiential

Langston's (2019) research also draws logical connections between the themes, reinforcing the integrative nature of conversion:

- **intellectualism** is linked with **social ties**, reflecting doubts, skepticism, and questions as discussed with clergy or other social connections
- **intellectualism** linked with **un-/pseudo-familiarity with Christianity or Christians** as Atheists often presumed the case against Christianity was strong due to 'conventional wisdom', but learned it was not as strong as had been thought
- **numinous experiences** are linked with **ritual behaviors** (church attendance, bible study, and prayer), one of the highest co-occurrences (27%) demonstrating strong connections with **prayer**, although also linked to **openness to experience** and **hardship** (social, psychological, external life problems) and **contra Atheism** (personal crisis)

- **social ties** and **ritual behaviors** also shared a high rate of co-occurrence (27%), reinforcing Christian rituals as taking place in communal contexts
- **un-/pseudo-familiarity with Christianity or Christians** (negative or undeveloped ideas of Christianity) linked with **social ties** (encounters with Christians or the bible), further linked to **ritual behavior** (church attendance)
- **authentic example** linked with **un-/pseudo-familiarity with Christianity or Christians** (14%) as Atheists were motivated, inspired to learn more through exposure to genuine embodied example, also producing **openness to experience**
- **religious study** was linked to **contra Atheism**, **intellectualism**, and **openness to experience**
- **contra Atheism** was highly interconnected to **hardship**

This data further solidifies the integrated nature of religious conversion of Atheists to Christians. To artificially reduce religious conversion to a single component is counter-intuitive. Rather, the interconnectedness of multiple, Substance and Function variables tell a fuller, more human story. Conversion is a dynamic process whereby context, experience, identity, relationships, intellect, and emotions work together in influencing an individual's aversion or openness towards embracing another 'grand story'. Although common themes occur, individual patterns are unique. Langston (2019, p. 14) confirms, stating,

The sequence and configuration of all factors that facilitate religious change for one individual are obviously unique to that person's life...their specific interaction is largely what facilitates the changes in question: not only are the proposed interconnections logically feasible, but *very few of our cases appeared to be characterized by only one thematic influence*.

As a result, while a *limited* number of elements can be expected for any person's overall case, there is *virtually no limit* to considerations of specific sequences and combinations of these elements. That is, each person's personal history and trajectory possess finite similarities (limited themes) and virtually infinite differences (i.e., sequences and combinations of themes).

Within this research, every subject with the narrative analysis sample group demonstrated thematic integration, from the strongest 'Function catalyst' to the strongest 'Substance catalyst' narratives. Although formal thematic correlation was not conducted, individual life stories demonstrated common themes yet various combinations and trajectories as shown in the variety of religious conversion patterns as well as diversity within those patterns.

10.3.2. Function of Belief in Conversion, a Partial Explanation of Conversion.

Although conversion has been conceptualized by contemporary researchers as a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon (Gooren, 2007; Rambo, 2010), disciplinary bias continues. While theoretical biases conceptually reduce religious conversion phenomenon, each perspective serves as a potential contributing factor to the whole of conversion.

10.3.2.1. Psycho-emotional motivations, a Partial Explanation of Conversion.

Humans are sentient beings driven by varied influences towards beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, consciously and/or sub-consciously. Issues of agency, psycho-emotional need and emotional dissonance come into play. Findings from this research affirmed psycho-emotional influences as partially influential towards conversion. However, it counters a broad-brushed stereotyping of conversions as predominately psycho-emotionally motivated, as in classic or contemporary theory. Within conversion literature, potential converts are viewed as either active agents and/or passive recipients within the conversion process. Within classic theory, potential converts are passive, not seeking a new worldview but are coerced by a religious group, emotionally enticed and enmeshed towards significant change in self (Straus; Richardson; Granqvist). In contemporary thought, potential converts are characterized as active agents seeking towards religious conversion. They are emotionally open to change, willing to embrace a new worldview, pursuing gradual self-actualization and transformation. Questing towards conversion is reinforced when strong social ties, ‘affective bonds,’ are formed and sustained (Straus, 1976; Richardson, 1985). Contemporary proponents also theorize conversion as motivated through need for attachment to God either in compensation for or in congruence with parental relationships. Still other researchers tout conversion as resultant from life crisis in a search for resolution.

Regarding agency, this research supports the view of potential convert as both active in questing and passive as influenced by social interaction and/or divine agency towards conversion. On survey inquiry, participants did not consider themselves active seekers in the conversion process. Only a minority (13.73%-15.68%) reported themselves as ‘actively

searching for truth about God’ or ‘actively seeking belief in Christianity’. Prior to conversion, respondents generally perceived themselves as ‘neutral’, ‘neither actively seeking or avoiding truth about God,’ or ‘not asking questions,’ ‘not seeking answers’ or ‘seeking belief’ in Christianity. Nearly two-thirds denied ‘actively seeking belief’ in Atheism or Christianity. This self-analysis on survey inquiry agrees with interview narratives regarding pre-conversion elevated resistance to change, particularly in the direction towards God generally and Christian belief at the Atheist Stage.³⁴² One-third of respondents reported ‘no perceived need for God’ prior to conversion. Almost one-half of the Atheists lacked any desire for belief, forty percent (40%) ‘did not want to believe Christianity was true’, and two-thirds ‘did not think anything would be sufficient to change their Atheistic worldview’. On its face, this resistance and/or reluctance countered the contemporary narrative promoting active agency. However, despite initial opposition towards change, additional survey inquiry and interview narratives positively revealed a personal intentionality in movement towards Conversion. Active agency began with and following events, experiences, and/or circumstances opening them towards (re)consideration of Christianity as a potentially viable perspective on reality; and, was demonstrated through Function- and/or Substance-motivated questing at the Catalyst Stage.

Study results also confirmed the potential convert’s passive role during the conversion process as recipients engaged in dynamic social interaction with a Christian or Christian community. Positive social influences allowed potential converts to be ‘passive’ recipient(s) of communicative engagement, learning, and belonging (to be discussed in the next section).

³⁴² Pre-conversion, many expressed willful contempt against God and Christianity and possessed strong negative emotions towards God, Christians, and Christianity as a belief system. They disdained the superstition of religious belief and concurrent psycho-emotional weakness of religious believers while simultaneously prideful in their lack of need for psychological construction in navigating life. Emotional pain from negative life events or prolonged experiences reinforced emotional resistance against God for some respondents who did not consider turning towards God for comfort as a viable option. As such, high levels of emotional and psychological resistance towards conversion in conjunction with an emotional sense of high rational superiority counters current social science narrative of potential convert as actively seeking. Emotional contempt often fueled aversion rather than attraction towards religious belief, particularly Christianity. Active resistance against seeking sustained for a variety of reasons, including desire for moral autonomy, socio-cultural and intellectual loss of viable plausibility and desirability.

However, psycho-emotional and/or social coercion or ‘feeling pressured towards belief’ accounted for only a small minority of participants (12.0%).

Secondly, this research found psycho-emotional need as partially contributory as Catalysts towards conversion but reduced in its contribution towards Conversion. At the Atheist Stage, participants inconsistently examined the negative personal implications of their worldview. Via survey inquiry, very few participants found Atheism emotionally or existentially satisfying. However, more than one-half of respondents soberly accepted the personal implications of their Atheistic belief (i.e., loss of grounded personal human value and dignity, loss of objective purpose and meaning, loss of hope for life after death) without despair. Forty-three percent of respondents ignored the negative implications of Atheism, and one-fifth justified the negative implications of Atheism. Approximately one-third of respondents appreciated the positive existential offerings from Christianity, although only one-fifth ‘emotionally desired the meaningful, contented lives of Christians.’

At the Catalyst Stage, psycho-emotional tension served as a precipitator towards openness for some respondents. Approximately one-fourth of respondents began to quest towards Christianity in order to ‘resolve growing tensions between my worldview and my emotional wellbeing’ or to ‘seek greater meaning, purpose and happiness in life.’ One-half of study participants agreed that ‘a quest for emotional fulfillment led them towards Christianity.’ Emotional and/or existential distress also prompted reconsideration, change of will and/or desire towards religious belief. Nearly half of the participants reported their ‘change in willingness to be open, to seek truth’ as contributory towards the conversion process. For one-quarter of potential converts, personal care and concern from Christians countered negative stereotypes, diffused negative emotions against religious belief, and positively served as a Catalyst towards conversion. At the Conversion Stage, a comparable number of participants, slightly more than one-quarter, affirmed ‘positive emotional consequences, a sense of purpose, meaning, and fulfillment’ served as a primary reason for belief in God and conversion to Christianity. When queried a to primary reason(s) for

conversion in light of all Function and Substance influences, only a minority endorsed psycho-emotional motivation. One-quarter of respondents reported 'positive emotional consequences, a sense of purpose, meaning, and fulfillment' as influential; and, only two subjects affirmed conversion as a mechanism to 'help deal with personal pain in my life.

Psycho-emotional benefits worked in tandem with Substance reasons towards validating coherence of the Christian worldview. For many, pre-conversion emotional hubris was diffused through recognition of personal failings and need through the conversion process. Participants described an increased sense of guilt, moral culpability, humility, and need for forgiveness through encountering a 'real' awareness of the presence of God internally and/or externally. Subjects also reported overwhelming emotions in and through spiritual experiences as well. These results appreciated psycho-emotional and/or existential need as important contributors for approximately one-fourth of the participants towards conversion. However, the findings were not sufficient to fully account for the sweeping narrative of classic theory of religious conversion characterizing religious conversion as an individualistic, psycho-emotional phenomenon driven by internal psychological need (Wm James, Feuerbach, Freud, Jung). A counter-argument may be offered towards these findings regarding the participants' presumed lack of conscious awareness of their own underlying psycho-emotional issues, much less their driving force towards conversion. However, this research respected participants' auto-interpretation of their own felt needs and motivations and acknowledged self-report as credible information resource.

Thirdly, this research also countered contemporary Attachment theories as primary in motivating religious conversion, although acknowledged contribution for a minority of subjects. Of those surveyed, a negative/troubled or (emotionally/physically) absent paternal or maternal relationship contributed to conversion in three (3/50) subjects per individual account. In contrast, a troubled/absent relationship with mother and/or father contributed to Atheism for twenty-one (21/50) participants. Alternatively, seeking God as a surrogate parent due to healthy paternal and/or maternal relationship contributed to conversion in a minority

of subjects who reported a positive relationship with a parent as influencing conversion. Within this research, endorsement of the Attachment theory yielded greater consistency with those seeking complimentary as opposed to compensatory relationship with God through conversion. Nevertheless, influence and/or experience with parents, whether positive or negative, played a minor adjunct role in the conversion process but not enough to warrant its role as fully explanatory to accomplish conversion.

Fourthly, this research countered a crisis event as a necessary precipitating factor in the early stages of conversion. Many contemporary theories and/or models of conversion (Rambo, 1993; Kahn, 2000)³⁴³ promote psycho-emotionally driven conversion as evoked through life crisis (Crisis Theory³⁴⁴) and/or life imbalance (Balance Theory³⁴⁵). On survey inquiry in this study, only 16-18% of subjects reported ‘a significant life crisis’ or ‘personal life crisis’ as instrumental towards religious conversion. However, research findings affirmed the present yet limited role ‘emotional dissonance’ played in the conversion process at the Catalyst Stage.

Overall, the presenting research both agrees with and differs from and classic psychological or contemporary theories and models of conversion regarding the nature and prevalence of psycho-emotional influence. This research affirmed dynamic active and passive participant roles in the conversion process. While this research confirmed a partial contributory role of psycho-emotional functional influences in all stages of belief, it departed from current conversion paradigms promoting crisis an essential role, particularly as a catalyst towards conversion. These findings challenge contemporary conversion models and exposes the need for potential re-conceptualization and reconsideration of psycho-emotional aspects as partially contributory but not essential. Psycho-emotional motivations and life

³⁴³ Per Lewis Rambo and Peter Kahn, both internal and external influences precipitate life crises and prompt resolution of tension.

³⁴⁴ Crisis Theory – Internal psychological tensions serve as a catalyst towards resolution. Life crisis precipitates emotional and/or existential tension, need for resolution prompting active quest.

³⁴⁵ Balance Theory – When life becomes ‘imbalanced’ due to a crisis, openness and questing follows in order to ‘make sense’ of the world and human experience.

experiences functionally contributed to formation of personal beliefs as well as the openness and/or resistance towards adapting an alternate view of reality. They served as a partial and/or secondary influence towards producing openness and reevaluation of existing one worldview towards seeking another. Within this paradigm, psycho-emotional contribution should be considered in light of the whole context of conversion process.

10.3.2.2. Sociological influences, a Partial Explanation of Conversion.

Social science literature portrays religious conversion as primarily induced through dynamic sociological variables. Specifically, conversion theorists contend for strong influence of social belonging, social contexts, affective bonds and social interactions in the conversion process. Further, theorists regard social influence as more important than ideological belief for the convert.

First, many social science theorists affirm the need for social belonging as driving individuals towards conversion (Seggar and Kunz, 1972; Austin, 1977; Greil, 1977; Richardson, 1977, 1985). Within this socially-driven paradigm, converts move towards religious groups in search of social belonging and self-fulfillment through social motivation, not new beliefs. Conversion literature contends affective bonds and social interaction inside and/or outside of the religious group as necessary towards conversion. While results in this research agree with social belonging as potentially motivating the conversion process, it confirms this for only a small minority of participants at Catalyst and Conversion Stages. At the Catalyst Stage, when queried as to the reason(s) for questing towards Christianity, only three subjects out of fifty (6.0%) affirmed the need to ‘find a sense of belonging, acceptance, and social community.’ Nearly 20% ‘wanted to satisfy a significant relationship(s)’. At the Conversion Stage, only four of fifty (8.0%) respondents reported ‘positive social consequences, a sense of belonging’ as motivational towards conversion. Only five participants (10.0%) included ‘social acceptance’ as an influence towards Christianity. Survey findings concurred with interview narratives in that only one subject moved towards conversion for solely social/functional reasons.

Secondly, according to the academic literature, social context, affective bonds, and social interaction are necessary for religious conversion. Further, without situational/social factors, conversion would not occur (Snow and Phillips, 1980). Rambo (1993) asserted context as the foundational influence towards self-identity and belonging, experiences and beliefs are formed and/or re-formed, including conversion. For Berger (1974), religious beliefs often stand or fall as plausible or implausible based upon [macro] social credibility. Other conversion researchers (Lofland and Stark, 1965; Gartrell and Shannon, 1985; Richardson, 1985) assert micro-social affective bonds inside and outside of a religious group influence credibility of considered beliefs. Moreover, social participation, sustained interaction, bonding and commitment to a new religious group are essential for conversion (Lofland and Stark, 1965; Snow and Phillips, 1980; Kahn, 2000; Austin, 1977).

The findings of this research agree that social contexts, affective bonds and social interactions contribute towards belief acceptance or rejection at the Atheism and Catalyst Stages but disagree as to their prevalence at or necessity for Conversion. At the Atheist Stage, participants held religious belief as grossly implausible due in part to macro-contextual influences holding negative rather than positive sway towards conversion. On survey, the majority of respondents reported educational (60.0%), cultural (74.50%), and socio-political (78.0%) contexts as encouraging belief in Atheism over Christianity. Three-quarters of respondents (78.0%) reported society as placing obstacles in the way of practicing Christianity as compared to the minority (16.0%) who reported societal obstacles in practicing Atheism. Michelle described Atheism as implicit in higher education:

Now my undergraduate experience was interesting spiritually because on the one hand I started getting more of the hostility. It was a secular university. The dominant ethos was 'Christianity is a superstition. It is passé. Science is true.' So, I was getting that. And the more I went on with my education, the more I got that. And I bought it hook, line, and sinker. Of course, I did. Why would I not? It's what they were teaching us. It was implicit.

From a cultural perspective, another participant described the tacit cultural shaping of his Atheism:

It's hard to explain over here. There was no God. There are punctuations of church. You are taken to assemblies at school, but you know kids – you are taken to church and there is some guy who is boring. You kick each other. You play games and you leave the church. It meant nothing. You heard nothing. But *the general tenure of the culture was that there was no god. So, it wasn't anywhere on any map that I would think of.*

When asked as to primary reason(s) for disbelief, close to half of respondents (23/50; 48.0%) endorsed 'lack of exposure to Christian belief, generally'.

At the Catalyst Stage, personal social influences strongly contributed towards breaking down resistance against belief in God, often characterized by surprising, affirmative interaction with Christians. Experiences with Christian(s) and active engagement with Christian community positively influenced potential converts towards openness and reconsideration of Christianity. Importantly, the majority of respondents (82.35%) reported 'positive social encounters with Christians' served to diffuse negative religious and/or Christian stereotypes, producing openness towards belief in God and Christianity. The positive impact of social encounters played an important supporting role as Catalyst for the majority, although was not considered by the respondents to be the primary motivator at the Conversion Stage. When asked as to primary reasons for conversion, social encounters contributed towards Conversion for approximately one-third of respondents who had 'positive personal experiences with religious people' and experienced 'the loving actions of Christians.'

Further, this research countered social participation, bonding, and commitment to a new religious group as essential for conversion. Social influences were contributive but limited. Beyond initial encountering with Christians, many respondents were positively influenced towards conversion through participation in a church community. Motivations underlying participation in church and/or group activities included both social interaction as well as desire towards learning substantive belief content of Christianity. At the Catalyst Stage, approximately two-third of respondents reported attending religious church services and one-half reported participating in religious group activities encouraged an openness and

movement towards Christianity. However, participation in the ‘new religious group’ was not necessary for conversion, challenging contemporary literature. At the Conversion Stage, only a small minority (5/50; 9.8%) reported conversion as partially motivated by social acceptance. When queried as to primary reasons for Conversion, only six of fifty-one subjects included ‘involvement with the Christian church’; and, four subjects cited ‘positive social consequences, a sense of belonging.’ Moreover, four of ten subjects (41.17%) reported they ‘believed before belonging’ to or participating in any Christian group or activities prior to conversion; and, half (52.0%) reported their conversion as ‘independent, apart from the influence of others.’ This remarkable finding of conversion apart from sociological influence counters the strong sociological narrative of necessity.

Thirdly, conversion theorists contend social influence as more important than ideological belief for the convert (Regenerus and Uecker, 2006; Seggar and Kunz, 1972; Snow and Phillips, 1980); ideology is selected based upon social interaction rather than belief contents (Snow and Phillips, 1980; Lofland and Skonovd, 1981); and social interaction influences intellectual credibility of new belief system (Greil, 1977; Gartrell and Shannon, 1985). Results from this study demonstrated limited effect from social influence upon substantive belief and conversion. The data partially affirmed various motifs of conversion (i.e., the (independent-driven) intellectual motif) as suggested by Lofland and Skonovd (1981); however, this research found Substance as predominantly integrated with Function as opposed to isolated, except for a small number of subjects solely driven by substantive intellectual content. Although social interaction and engagement served as catalytic in producing openness towards consideration of an alternative perspective, Substance of belief played a more critical role towards conversion than did Function sociological influence. The overwhelming majority of respondents in this study moved towards conversion due to belief that God was objectively real, and the tenets of Christianity were true more than for social and/or functional reasons.

Substance content was influential at the Catalyst Stage (greater on quantitative than qualitative analysis). However, at the Conversion Stage, the majority of participants reported Substance as a critical component, as reported in the major findings section of this chapter. When asked on survey as to primary reason(s) for Conversion, Substance answers received higher endorsements over Function answers. Interview narratives comparably revealed many respondents would not have converted to Christianity if their new beliefs were not objectively true despite functional benefits. When talking with his Christian girlfriend about his potential conversion, Charles recalled,

And so, I said to [her], 'I am not going to become a Christian just because you are a Christian because I believe you should only become a Christian if you believe that Christianity is true. It is a matter of intellectual integrity.' Then I said to her, 'I will go on an intellectual journey of discovery to see whether I can find answers to my questions, Does God exist? Are miracles possible? Was Jesus the Son of God? Did he perform these miracles? And so on. I will go on this journey of discovery.'

This research also contests the premise that converts were motivated by social belonging rather than belief content, as respondents were often alienated from prior social groups, suffering personal social alienation in adapting a Christian ideology and identity as observed in Iyadurai's (2011) 'hostility stage'. Due to the strong negative caricaturing and perception of Christianity and Christians among the Atheist population, conversion often caused personal social loss as opposed to social gain. From the interview narratives, close to thirty percent of participants reported negative responses and/or rejection from friends and family post-conversion. In such cases, subjects reported a greater need towards accepting what they came to believe as truth over social need or convention. Rather, this research agrees with Heirich's (1977) assertions that social influences are contributive, showing 'the route of the religious seeker'; however, are not sufficient to provide full explanation as to the shift in converts' 'core sense of reality'. Heirich contended that conversion requires a response from 'their whole being,' including examination of the new religious claims

subsequently affecting future actions and choices.³⁴⁶ Within this research, social interaction played an important catalytic role in diffusing resistance and allowing openness towards consideration of religious belief. However, social considerations alone were not necessary or sufficient to accomplish conversion. As aforementioned, forty percent of respondents were not actively engaged in the new religious community prior to conversion, a substantial finding in light of the social science literature presuming social interaction as an essential component. The conversion patterns drawn from interviews confirmed the weight of Substance over Function in moving from the Catalyst towards the Conversion Stage. Integration of Function and Substance remains important in consideration of motivations of the Atheist towards conversion to Christianity.

10.3.3. Substance of Belief, an Integral Part of Conversion

Within this research, Substance of belief included both a cognitive, intellectual component (Substance Intellectual (SI)) as well as a religious experiential component (Spiritual Experiential (SE)) as contributory towards religious conversion in naturalistic atheism to conservative forms of Christianity.

10.3.3.1. Substance – Conversion as a Cognitive Phenomenon

The cognitive aspect of conversion has received limited attention in the academic literature. Beyond social and/or psycho-emotional influences, a small (but vital) number of scholars contend for presence and role of intellectual Substance in conversion. In their view, religious conversion may be prompted through a sense of cognitive dissonance and felt intellectual need for resolving cognitive tension between existing beliefs and human experience. Substantive content is also instrumental in determining explanatory power of

³⁴⁶ HEIRICH, M. 1977. Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories about Religious Conversion. *American Journal of Sociology*, 12, 653-680. Max Heirich affirmed both substantive and functional motivations in religious conversion as both cognitive and experiential, comprehensive in belief and life change. However, his review of 50 empirical religious conversion studies showed social sciences as favoring a functional, experiential conversion. Testing this presumption, Heirich's study affirmed social influences as catalytic towards conversion for approximately 50% of participants, but not fully sufficient towards conversion and shifting 'root reality.' Heirich found immediate social relationships more influential than psychological state or prior socialization, but 'contact alone' was insufficient towards changing basic assumptions about life and reality. Heirich recommended a systematic approach to determine multiple 'mutual interaction' of influences (i.e., social, psychological, and divine).

existing and potential belief systems. Theorists contend full conversion requires movement beyond mere participation to belief in a new root reality (Straus, 1979; Heirich, 1977); substantive motivations are part of religious conversion and cognitive components warrant consideration (Rambo, 2010).

Further, humans generally seek to make sense of the world (Lofland and Skonovd's 'intellectual motif' 1989); and, pivotal life experiences and disillusionment motivates a search towards resolution of cognitive tension in order to restore meaning (Greil 1977; Richardson, 1985; Gartrell and Shannon, 1985, Rational Choice Approach; John Pitt, 1991, Balanced Theoretical Approach) or to provide a greater explanatory system (Rambo, 1999). Doubts and questioning produce openness to change and questing after answers (Kahn and Green, 2004); however, belief content must relate to life circumstances, possessing both intellectual and experiential explanatory power (Ozorak, 1989; Heirich, 1977). Problem solving tendencies play a role in resolving felt cognitive dissonance as most individuals seek 'secular remedy' for 'secular problem' (Seggar and Kunz, 1972; Austin, 1977; Snow and Phillips, 1980); intellectual congruence between two ideologies is important in conversion (Heirich 1977; Greil, 1977); intellectual congruence is not essential due to social encountering of unlimited perspectives (Greil, 1977) or necessary (Snow and Phillips, 1980).

First, this research confirms the importance of cognitive influence in conversion as requiring movement beyond mere participation to belief in new root reality. All except one respondent valued Substance, (i.e., the grounding of belief through logical/evidential investigation and/or through a convincing spiritual experience), as instrumental towards conversion. At the Atheist Stage, respondents placed high value on the objective truth of their held worldview as superior over other ideologies, that it was intellectually satisfying and provided substantive, rational answers to issues of life and reality. This heightened value of believing in objective truth sustained in the evaluation and shift from one worldview to another at the Conversion Stage. Surveys and interviews demonstrated consistent cognitive need towards substantive grounding in addition to functional influences. Although most

subjects valued Substance as critically important towards conversion, on survey only a minority reported movement towards conversion for ‘solely substantive reasons’ and as revealed (through interviews) on religious conversion patterns. For the majority of subjects, both Substance and Function worked in tandem towards accomplishing conversion, although with Substance gaining greater influence through the conversion process. Mixed-method analysis confirmed decreasing Functional and increasing Substance variables from Catalyst Stage to Conversion.

Secondly, study results validate the assertion that humans are driven to make sense of the world, particularly in light of cognitive dissonance in both matters of intellectual and/or experiential disparity with one’s existing worldview. Cognitive tension produced the need towards resolution of held doubts and provision of a greater explanatory system for the intellectual population in this research. At the Catalyst Stage, more than one-third of participants reported initiation of questing as motivated by a desire to resolve intellectual uncertainties and tensions held between Atheistic worldview and their intellectual and experiential understanding of the world. Moreover, three-quarters of subjects reported their natural tendency to question led them towards Christianity.

Thirdly, this research substantiates the premise that intellectual congruence between worldviews for conversion as not essential due to the social encountering of unlimited perspectives. All subjects in this research converted to a ‘discongruent’ ideology - moving from naturalistic Atheism to belief in a supernatural, personal God. Introduction to an informed Christian and/or substantive Christian writings, podcasts, etc., often posed an intellectual challenge prompting a quest. They also diffused negative stereotypes of Christians as uneducated and ignorant, countered misunderstanding of Christianity as substantively unwarranted, and/or refuted apparent irreconcilability of science and religious belief. Nearly one-third of respondents began intellectual questing having observed ‘the rationale of knowledgeable Christians regarding their beliefs.’

However, the necessity of social encountering in introducing the new perspective bears qualification. Some Atheists encountered Christians and Christianity through social introduction but others through independent searching apart from any social interaction. In this technological age, ‘encountering’ other perspectives is readily available. On survey, one-half reported an independent search and choice towards belief prior to belonging to any religious group. This finding strongly counters sociological presumption of social encountering and/or interaction as a necessary cause or step in the conversion process.

Moreover, this research counters the concept ‘problem-solving tendencies’ are typically characterized by subjects seeking ‘secular remedy’ for ‘secular problems’ (Seggar and Kunz 1972; Austin 1977; Snow and Phillips, 1980). While some subjects described initial problem-solving as secular or even generically spiritual (e.g., ‘Anything except [the Christian] God’, Adam), approximately one-third of participants (36.0%) eventually sought answers outside of naturalism towards theism in order to resolve intellectual and/or personal experiential tensions not answerable within the Atheistic worldview.

Participants cognitively embraced a new understanding of root reality as ultimately the best explanation for the world and their own human experience. A strong majority, over three-quarters of study respondents endorsed ‘intellectual discussion, issues of evidence and objective truth influenced them towards belief in Christianity.’ Post-conversion confidence in the truth of the Christian worldview was higher than pre-conversion confidence in Atheism. Three-quarters of respondents portrayed themselves as ‘highly confident’ in their Christian beliefs as compared to one-quarter who, upon self-reflection, held the same level of heightened confidence in their Atheistic worldview. Post-conversion, nearly 90% expressed confidence in the existence of God as a ‘knowable, objective, and rational premise.’ This level of confidence was grounded through Substance of belief, not merely functional influences. Survey findings are confirmed by religious conversion patterns revealed through interview narratives revealing the vital presence and role of Substance, most prominently at

the Conversion Stage. This confidence found warrant not only due to Substantive Intellectual (SI) components of belief, but as combined with Spiritual Experiential (SE) influences.

10.3.3.2. Substance – Conversion as a Spiritual Phenomenon

The role of divine agency and religious experience has been associated with religious conversion in the literature (William James, 1902). Per Rambo (1993, p. 10), ‘Religion is the sacred – the encounter with the holy that, according to many religions, constitutes both the source and goal of a conversion.’ In light of his extensive research and interviewing, he acknowledged a prevalence of ‘extraordinary and/or mystical experiences’ as ‘often stimulating conversions’ (Rambo, 1993, p. 48). However, he acknowledged (1993, pp. 10-11), theological and spiritual aspects of conversion are typically ignored or ‘bracketed’ ‘in order to uncover the social and personal dynamics of conversion. Not surprisingly, acknowledgment of transcendence as experiential in conversion is infrequent in contemporary social science literature, particularly as related to the West. When addressed, transcendence is instrumental as the convert ‘yearns’ towards in self-actualizing meaning and/or purpose rather than as caused and/or experienced in interacting with a personal divine agent who is ontologically ‘real’ in essence and in being. Rambo clarified, ‘Many people desire to experience God in a way that will enrich and expand their lives. Social scientists rarely admit such positive motivations for conversion, tending to see them as rationalizations for ‘deeper’ motivations (often pathological) that are being masked by religious ideas.’ This truncated approach fails to appreciate the important contribution of spiritual experiences towards conversion. Per Rambo (1993, pp. 10-11),

However, scholars may choose to delineate its causes, nature and consequences, conversion is essentially theological and spiritual. Other forces are operative, but the meaning, the significance, and the goals are religious and or spiritual *to the convert*.

Phenomenologically speaking, interpretations that deny the religious dimension fail to appreciate the convert’s experience and attempt to put this experience into interpretative frameworks that are inappropriate, even hostile, to the phenomenon. Some psychological and sociological explanations of conversion are reductionist, and converts are rightly disconcerted when their experience is discounted, if not rejected, by the researcher...*Good scholarship*

should start with rich description of the phenomenon, and with respect for its integrity.

More recent conversion researchers acknowledge the role of spiritual experiences and divine agency play in transforming the lives of converts (Iyadurai, 2014, Langston, 2019). Langston et al. (2019, p. 21) confirmed former Atheist converts' general acknowledgment of 'divine influence' in their stories, that 'on the whole, narrators often acknowledged that they were not (entirely) responsible for this new change in themselves, but rather, they interpreted such a change as the result of having been acted upon by something divine, other-worldly, or external to themselves'.

Results from this research strongly affirm the contributory presence and influence of Spiritual Experiential (SE) in the conversion process. This finding is remarkable considering pre-conversion Atheistic belief of all study respondents affirmed a naturalistic, materialistic worldview. Narratives within this study counter the reductionistic functional narrative and affirm the need for rich phenomenological description as provided by the convert. Many participants perceived themselves as passive recipients of God's action on their behalf in order to accomplish conversion. Close to half of the converts attributed 'a religious/mystical experience' as a primary reason towards conversion, affirming the active agency of God and their passivity as recipients of God's divine action towards them. Following an unexpected religious experience, Susan stated, 'There was nothing in my life that led me to seek God. I simply didn't care. He is sovereign, and He chose me for reasons I will not know this side of heaven.' On survey, more than one-third (38.0%-46.0%) reported some form of 'religious experience' (SE) as influential in their Conversion. On interview, of those who reported Substantive influence towards conversion, three-quarters reported Substance Experiential (71%) influences.

Respondents described spiritual experiences before, during, or following conversion. These experiences prompted openness and/or questing towards the reality of God and truths of Christianity, precipitated spiritual conversion due to the sudden, palpable awareness of

God, or experientially confirmed God's reality post-conversion.³⁴⁷ At the Catalyst Stage, per survey, seven subjects (7/50; 13.73%) reported questing in response to a 'religious or mystical experience;' one subject (1/50; 2.0%) began asking questions in response to a 'dream or vision.' Further survey inquiry revealed nineteen subjects (19/50; 38.0%) as 'attracted to or convinced of the Christian faith through encountering a religious experience with God.' At the Conversion Stage, per survey, spiritual experiences were contributory as primary reason(s) for conversion. Substantive (SE) responses ranged from 'a religious/mystical experience' (23/50; 46.0%), 'encountering a religious experience with God' (19/50; 38.0%), and 'subjective personal evidence for God' (21/50; 42.0%), to 'answered prayer' (12/50; 24.0%). Dennis clarified, 'My conversion was sudden and significant. The mystical experience I believe was an encounter with the Holy Spirit who opened my eyes and caused an immediate worldview shift and subsequent shifting as prayers were answered.' Daniel acknowledged the primacy of religious experience as compared to other substantive and/or functional influences, commenting, 'Many of the others apply but the first step was a numinous experience.' James spoke of the thorough personal transformation which occurred with his spiritual encounter, stating, 'I challenged God to prove Himself and had a 'Saul on the road to Damascus experience, totally transformed my life!'...'I met Jesus in the form of a bright loving light and a voice, all doubts were vanquished. Jesus is my EVERYTHING every minute for 42 years!' A spiritual encounter immediately convincing of the reality of God, Melissa stated, 'I was not an Atheist for most of the religious/mystical experience. How long do you think it took for Paul to change his mind after Jesus appeared to him on the road?'

This project also confirms converts' transformed beliefs in a supernatural reality and the role of God in their conversions. The integration of Substance (intellectual and spiritual) and Function elements move the protagonist along from their initial state towards conflict or

³⁴⁷ Importantly, while subjects expressed knowledge and validation of God as real and/or true through religious experience, many pursued rational, intellectual, evidential grounding apart from or in addition to transient, experiential personal encounters.

challenge, help from a guide, move to action, resolution and transformation of the protagonist. This comprehensive perspective appreciates the fullness of story progression from beginning to end. To dismiss the phenomenon of spiritual experience within conversion potentially invalidates a primary motivator of religious belief and extracts the heart of the ‘meaning, significance, and goal’ as well as the converts’ narrative, as Rambo cautioned. It is reductionistic, as Berger asserted (1974, 128-129), diminishing an extraordinary to an ordinary phenomenon. His words deserve repeating for emphasis:

The functional approach to religions, whatever the original theoretical intentions of its authors, serves to provide quasi-scientific legitimations of a secularized worldview. It achieves this purpose by an essentially simple cognitive procedure: The specificity of the religious phenomenon is avoided by equating it with other phenomena. The religious phenomenon is ‘flattened out.’ Finally, it is no longer perceived.

Religion is absorbed into a night in which all cats are grey. The greyness is the secularized view of reality in which any manifestations of transcendence are, strictly speaking, meaningless, and therefore can only be dealt with in terms of social or psychological functions that can be understood without reference to transcendence.

Within a reductionistic approach, transcendence is lost. Religion is lost. Conversion becomes merely motion borne from functional impetus, its multidimensionality flattened and secularized. The positive report of spiritual experiences by subjects in this study affirmed the rich descriptive power available for conversion and has justified placement in a broadened conversion paradigm inclusive of extraordinary substantive phenomenon.

10.4. Implications and Future Considerations - Towards a Fully Integrated View of Religious Conversion

Cumulative findings from this research project confirmed the need to view religious conversion in a more inclusive manner, particularly within conservative forms of Christianity. In addressing thesis questions B1 Substance played an inherent and increasing role in all three stages from disbelief to belief, particularly from Catalyst towards Conversion. While Function influence held significance in the Catalyst Stage of the conversion process, its presence did not yield enough potency to fully explain the converts’ eventually belief at the Conversion Stage. Substance variables served as compelling and/or convincing

components towards conversion, either alone or in combination with Function for the overwhelming majority of respondents in this research. The primary role of Substance, particularly at the Conversion Stage, was determined to be statistically significant, verifying a deserved place in considering religious conversion. Narrative analysis confirmed consistent Function and Substance thematic integration from Pre-Metanarrative to Post-Metanarrative change. These findings challenge the predominant existing functionally-based models of conversion, holding tension relative to the current theoretical reductionistic predisposition towards religious conversion in the academic literature. Implications from this research warrant serious reconsideration towards the definition and conception of religious conversion, the motivations underlying conversion, the process of conversion, the modeling of conversion as well as the methodology for conversion research towards an integrated narrative paradigm particularly within a conventional understanding of Christianity.

10.4.1. Towards an Inclusive Definition of Religious Conversion

Consideration of the definition of conversion is critical in light of research findings. Definitions are the foundation upon which a concept is understood, informing subsequent intellectual and practical engagement. As Berger (1974; p. 126) affirmed, definitions determine ‘what is included and what is excluded’ from the ‘intellectual focus’ of a particular entity like religion. Definition of a known entity or phenomenon not only instructs theoretical conception, but further modeling, research, and dialogue. Therefore, it is important to refine the definition of religious conversion based upon the most recent findings while lending serious consideration to the relationship of such findings to the whole of literature for it leads to theoretical conception and practice.

Subjects within this research shifted ‘root reality’ due to the convincing substantive nature of objective and/or spiritual experiential truths of God and/or Christianity. Within this context, inclusion of Substance respects the emic perspective, allowing room for intellectual journeying and spiritual experiences as prompting conversion. Non-inclusion of Substance truncates converts’ perceived experiences to part of their story rather than the whole,

distorting the narrative accounts. Exclusion invalidates what converts deem as authentic and essential in motivating and/or confirming belief in what or who is deemed to be ‘true’ or ‘real’ in the conversion process. It potentially invalidates ‘the experience of the ‘experiencer’’ due to restrictive hetero-interpretation of the subjects’ conversion narrative. From an etic/outsider perspective, exclusion of substance reduces the descriptive depth and power of conversion, reducing it to solely functional means and motivations. It is not seriously considering the subjects’ reported experiences, artificially delimiting the fullness of conception and definition of conversion and disallows the potential reality of an objective, transcendent agent as informing conversion.

In light of this research, a more fully integrated definition of religious conversion is warranted. While still retaining Rambo’s broadened, holistic conception and definition of conversion, this definition seeks towards recognizing the presence and role Substance plays in the conversion process. It takes seriously religious group tenets and acknowledges the potential convert who deems truth, belief, and subsequent adherence to belief-driven practices as an important consideration in the conversion process. A new working definition of religious conversion provides a rich description of a multidimensional phenomenon with the integration of Substance and Function influences. The definition considers the variability of external and internal influences affecting pre-conversion belief, catalysts, and conversion within a broader context. It acknowledges the uniqueness of each conversion and roles of individuals in the process while appreciating a progressive movement from one embodied meta-narrative to another over time (allowing for vacillation and/or moments of sudden transformation experiences within the progress). It honors the substantive religious nature of conversion as inherently spiritual, accepting personal divine agency as potentially causal in the conversion process. Further, it affirms substantive intellectual and/or spiritual experiential belief (i.e., in God as ‘real’) as a potentially viable, critical aspect of conversion in addition to a wide range of functional variables. A potential definition of religious conversion is as follows:

Religious conversion is a multi-faceted mysterious phenomenon in the resignation of one worldview (religious and/or non-religious), identity, and practices and the adaptation of another through integrated functional (socio-cultural, psychological, experiential, etc.) and/or substantive (Divine, religious experiential, intellectual) means. Both active and passive in the process, converts both influence and are influenced by external and internal states, beliefs, circumstances, experiences and causal agents towards conversion. Individuals are uniquely situated and motivated to embrace religious reality due to the convincing nature of the religious belief as true as well as beneficial through a dynamic process of change. Consequences of religious conversion are demonstrated through change in perspectives, priorities, practices, as well as spiritual, emotional, and existential well-being.

10.4.2. Towards Inclusive Conception of Conversion in Future Theory and Research

The primary goal of studying religion and religious conversion is the understanding of it as a phenomenon. Because of its complex, multifaceted nature, there is a natural tendency to reduce religion and religious conversion to its component parts in order to facilitate an adequate study. Since the initiation of the study of religion, debate has existed regarding the viability of reduction. Reduction of a complex entity into its simpler, component parts for study grounds the successful basis for most scientifically-based methodology in order to further knowledge through adequate theoretical explanations (Yonan, 1972, p. 131) and is effective in determining natural causation, effect and mechanism of objects. Reduction within the humanities and/or social sciences, however, delimits consideration of the role of agency (both human and ultimate) in precipitation of religious belief.

While reductionism within the natural sciences possesses explanatory power for much working within the natural realm, it may be too reductive in explaining religious conversion. Lennox (2009, pp. 47-57) asserted ontological reductionism lacks grounding as an 'explanation for everything'. In his view, it is impossible for a reductionistic mechanism (an accumulation of such lower 'parts') to provide adequate explanation of agency or purpose. Cause and effect are part of the explanatory mechanism, the process by which events occur

and 'things work'. However, this explanation is inherently limited in its capabilities to explain the greater, grander reason for 'being'. For Lennox, mechanisms can explain processes, but cannot explain agency, the 'grand show', but 'only the parts and pieces of the workings of the show.'

Researchers of religion and religious conversion have considered the nature of reduction, its effects and implications for research, that research methodology is grounded in underlying theoretical presuppositions. For Rambo (1993, p. 259), 'Scholars of conversion must be aware of theoretical issues and judiciously use theoretical options in conversion study'. An investigator's *a priori* presuppositions inform potential scope of investigative study. Reduction based upon naturalistic presuppositions artificially delimits the realm and nature of religious study and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. To the degree that reductionism is employed in religious conversion study, a comparable degree of explanatory power and scope remains potentially lost in the process.

Since the goal of study is to understand religious conversion, investigators are compelled to seek the most comprehensive yet judicious means of research. Comprehensive study findings herein warrant refinement of research method towards a fully inclusive view and methodological research of religious conversion. Accepting a religious group's beliefs as 'true' and/or 'real' potentially plays a significant part of conversion for the convert. Fair-minded research entails serious acknowledgment of the auto-narratives and interpretations of the interviewees themselves rather than presupposing the non-acceptability of certain types of explanations as suitable. Future methodological constructs should account for substantive causes (i.e., spiritual experiences, rational/intellectual grounding) as potentially persuasive toward conversion. This warrant is based upon participants' reports and narratives attributing high value to Substance as an inherent aspect of conversion as well as methodological imperative towards auto-interpretation of narrative accounts.

If reductionism prevails, both in concept and in practice, investigative study of religious conversion stands bound by its own self-limitations, capturing excessively limited

slices of religious phenomenon and conversion reality. Exclusion of Substance predisposes the research to functional bias, precluding recognition, presence and role of Substance as viable, even among those groups whose truths are effectively relativized; and, artificially delimits fullness and proper accounting of conversion. By extension, appreciation for normative conversion expands future methodological considerations. Whether or not the researcher adheres to belief in substantive ‘truths’ of religion and/or a supernatural agency as causative, methodology should be structured insofar as to grant a place to allow for subjects’ perceived convincing events, circumstances, states, experiences and agencies (i.e., natural and/or supernatural) in order to provide broadened scope and increase explanatory power of religious conversion. In sum, inclusion of substantive content is beneficial for the researcher in providing appreciation of a complex phenomenon and the full emic perspective.

10.4.3. Towards Inclusive Narrative Model of Religious Conversion

This research warrants conceptualization and modeling of religious conversion beyond the current descriptive framework towards a narrative analysis paradigm. Although stages of belief have been incorporated in prior modeling (e.g., Lofland and Stark 1965; Rambo 1993), proposed processes have not incorporated both Function and Substance influences. When Substance has been determined a motivator, it has been an isolated ‘motif’ and/or typology of conversion (e.g., Lofland and Stark 1981, etc.) rather than integrated with Function. Rambo’s 1993 stage model of religious conversion stands as the prominent conceptual construct for the conversion process allowing for a process considering historical, social, cultural, psychological, religious contexts and influences. In 2009, Rambo further critiqued conversion models as needing to incorporate psycho-emotional, sociological and cognitive influences as potentially motivating factors. Although a new model was not proposed, in 2010, Rambo set forth a ‘New Approach’ to conversion research incorporating a broadened scope of influences and paradigm. He sought towards conceptual expansion of conversion within his framework to allow for variable global, socio-cultural expressions of

religion beyond Western culture. This research conditionally affirms certain stages of Rambo's original conversion model.³⁴⁸

Research findings from this project supported a narrative-oriented approach to religious conversion and appreciates causal processes by which some events influence others. For Manicas (2009, p. 2), 'There is always causal complexity and the sequence of time is important.' Through interviews, individuals reveal the relationships between entities and events which produce an end result (Maxwell, 2012). Conversion from naturalistic Atheism to Christianity entails a temporal progression of circumstances (i.e., social, cultural, experiential), events (i.e., mental/intellectual, physical, religious), and states (i.e., emotional, existential, moral, and spiritual) unique for each individual. This process parallels the biographical reconstruction which occurs as the convert changes from one embodied meta-narrative to another.

The proposed Religious Conversion Narrative Analysis Approach used in this thesis appreciates the multi-dimensionality, dynamic/temporal, and integrative storied nature of one conversion cycle. It includes both Substance intellectual / supernatural and Function

³⁴⁸ Context' inherently played a role in shaping pre-conversion baseline beliefs as well as influencing resistance or movement towards religious belief. Generally speaking, this study confirmed (macro) Context as a stronger contributor towards disbelief than towards belief. Secularized Western socio-cultural and educational contexts have meaningfully reduced plausibility of religious belief and caused heightened resistance and contempt, particularly towards Christianity. Pre-conversion (Atheist Stage) was informed by macro-context more remarkably than were Catalyst and/or Conversion Stages. In contrast, familial and personal (micro) social-relational contexts promoted both movement from and towards religious conversion, informing both Substance and Function motivations. 'Crisis' played a role, but only for a minority, as previously discussed.

However, this research recognized an appreciation for semantic variation in the term 'crisis' as possibly inclusive of external and/or internal crisis events, prolonged experiences, and or felt cognitive and/or emotional dissonance between ideology and lived experience. When conception was broadened, 'Crisis' typified more individuals; however, this research also demonstrated individuals who moved towards conversion apart from crisis. Non-crisis impetus towards searching (i.e., curious, inquisitive, or defiant persons seeking to disprove religious ideology, etc.) warranted explanation and a place in religious conversion modeling. Similarly, this research affirmed 'Quest' stage as a part of the religious conversion process, acknowledging both active and passive roles as demonstrated in the Catalyst Stage of conversion. 'Encounter' was affirmed through positive encounters with Christians (via socially, through technological exposure such as an online debate, etc.), although not necessarily with a specific recruiting religious group; and, 'Interaction' stage was verified only insofar as the convert engaged with the new religious community. However, Substance of belief proved to be a critical component of conversion over and above social interaction and/or social commitment to the new group. Slightly more than forty percent (21/50; 41.17%) of the participants 'believed before they belonged' or had any initial or prolonged social interaction with Christians. 'Commitment' stage was a component of conversion for all subjects. A key differentiator in this study was the commitment to Christ/God in conversion (whether apart from or in association with a religious group) as opposed to mere commitment to a religious group as in Rambo's model. Post-conversion level of Commitment was quite high among the Converts as demonstrated by their post-conversion perspective.

Interview narratives affirmed notable 'Consequences' of conversion as yielding dramatic life change and high level of confidence in the truth of the Christian worldview for most converts. In light of positive affirmation of Substance within religious conversion, this research justifies an approach for religious conversion incorporating both Function and Substance influences.

influences, as well as indicators of conversion and transformation (language and embodied living) through biographical reconstruction. This model confirms aspects of other narrative models (Zock, 2006, Gooren, 2010, Dufault-Hunter, 2012) but moves beyond them in scope to capture a dynamic interaction of Function and Substance variables as well as biographical reconstruction in conversion. The model, therefore, provides potential fullness of description for both the converts' auto-narratives and surveyed perspectives as well as the researchers' observations of this multi-dimensional, complex, mysterious phenomenon. The narrative analysis within this research study demonstrated practical application of this theoretical approach and advises towards use of this or a similar paradigm for future research.

10.5. Thesis Conclusion

Religious conversion is a multi-faceted mysterious phenomenon in the resignation of one worldview (religious and/or non-religious), identity, and practices and the adaptation of another through integrated functional (socio-cultural, psychological, experiential, etc.) and/or substantive (Divine, religious experiential, intellectual) means. Both active and passive in the process, converts both influence and are influenced by external and internal states, beliefs, circumstances, experiences and causal agents towards conversion. Individuals are uniquely situated and motivated to embrace religious reality due to the convincing nature of the religious belief as true as well as beneficial through a dynamic process of change. Consequences of religious conversion are demonstrated through embodied change in perspectives, priorities, language, and practices, as well as spiritual, emotional, and existential well-being.

The first chapters of this thesis demonstrated that religious conversion is an integrated phenomenon through mixed-method research. Applying narrative analysis to the interviews strongly confirmed a combination of Function and Substance influences in every conversion story. Moreover, a synthesis of motivations remains present at the narrative level even among those stories previously classified as outliers due to their primary functional or substantive content. The findings confirm an assimilation of motivating variables to the

extent that the question becomes not whether both function and substance are part of the conversion process but rather ‘to what extent?’ and ‘in what way?’.

The subjects interviewed in this study demonstrated a dramatic change in beliefs, identity and life through their religious conversion from naturalistic Atheism to a classic, conservative understanding and belief in God, the truth of the Bible, and the reality of the Christian worldview. Their stories held a passionate earnestness, that what they came to believe was true, that God was real; and, that they had good intellectual and personal experiential reasons that their life story was grounded in the larger true story of God and what He is doing throughout history. They expressed that their newfound beliefs were the best explanation for ‘the way things are’ in reality, that they did not make such a dramatic shift for merely functional purposes but for a person, Jesus Christ. Their narrative stories demonstrated the central role of conversion in their lives, describing significant post-conversion transformation as they become part of the larger story which defines who they are, where they have been, where they are going, and for what purpose. The life change, collectively and individually, is nothing short of extraordinary.

Based upon study results, this research advocates for a comprehensive, integrative conception inclusive of both Function and Substance components as instrumental in the conversion process, particularly in conservative forms of Christianity. The data confirmed a richer narrative affirming the full accounts of those who have been converted; and, provided a richer understanding towards inclusive aspects of conversion than reductionistic paradigms. The limited viewing of religious conversion in an educated, intellectual population in six Western countries limits its potential for generalization, particularly due to its non-randomized sampling. Constraint in the application of this research is acknowledged, particularly among those populations for whom religious affiliation (as opposed to conversion entailing a change in ‘root reality’) is merely cultural and/or social in nature and in which Substantive belief plays little or no anticipated role. Nevertheless, inclusion of Substance as potentially contributive is warranted to determine the viability of its influential

presence in conversion. As religious conversion is multi-faceted, it naturally follows that religious conversion methodology should incorporate a widened investigative scope, particularly in light of heuristic study. Substance of belief plays an important role for the potential convert in assessing whether or not respective religious ‘stories’ or tenets of belief match reality and are worthy of acceptance, belief, and adherence. Although the weight of belief content varies among religious systems, ample room should be granted for its presence in order to provide a rich ‘thick’ description of an extraordinary phenomenon.

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RELIGIOUS CONVERSION OF EDUCATED ATHEISTS TO CHRISTIANITY IN SIX CONTEMPORARY WESTERN COUNTRIES

PART FOUR: APPENDICES

12.1. Participant Recruitment Letter	397
12.2. Participant Information Sheet	398
12.3. Consent Form	401
12.4. SoGoSurvey Form	402
12.5. Religious Conversion Interview Questionnaire	413
12.6. Interview Category Theme Nodes for NVivo Coding	415
12.7. Religious Conversion Patterns	418
12.8. Narrative Theme Nodes for NVivo Coding	429
12.9. Narrative Analysis Findings: Language, Themes and Biographical Shifts	430
12.9.1. Canonical Text	430
12.9.2. Context and Community	433
12.9.3. Identity	438
12.9.4. Experience	443
12.9.5. Emotional Sense-Making	450
12.9.6. Purpose and Meaning	456
12.9.7. Personal Will and Desire	464
12.9.8. Intellectual Sense-Making	469
12.9.9. Spirituality, Supernatural and Spiritual Experience	484
12.10. Integrated Narrative Analysis Memo with Reflexive Comments (Example)	496
12.11. Narrative Theme Node Coding (Example)	515
12.12. Narrative Category Shift Charts	522
12.13. Reflexive Writing	534

12.1 Participant Recruitment Letter

Date

[Potential Participant]

RE: PhD Research Study
University of Birmingham
Department of Theology and Religion

Dear _____,

I am a PhD student in Theology and Religion at the University of Birmingham UK. My research question investigates motivations underlying religious conversion from Atheism to Christianity, whether primarily functional (what Christian faith 'does for you' socially, psychologically, etc.) or substantive (what Christian faith 'is,' the content and/or truth of belief, the reality of transcendent experience).

I am currently seeking Atheists who have converted to Christianity to participate in this research project. Those who participate in the study will complete a confidential online questionnaire followed by an interview with me (either in person or via Skype); and, their anonymity will be guaranteed. It is my hope that this research will further a more fully-orbed perspective upon this complex conversion phenomenon; and, that it will promote insight into and dialogue between those of diametrically opposed worldviews.

Considering your conversion from Atheism to Christian faith, would you be willing to take part in this pivotal study? The protocol is currently in development and it is our goal to complete the interviews by December 2014. I will accommodate your schedule as able should you decide to participate.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. Please let me know if you have any questions about this research study. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jana Harmon



12.2. Participant Information Sheet

11Page

Religious Conversion from Atheism to Christianity in Western Culture

Participant information sheet

WHO AM I?

I am Jana Harmon, a doctoral student in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Birmingham who is doing research on motivations underlying conversion of Atheists to Christianity in Western culture.

WHY AM I DOING THIS RESEARCH?

Research in religious conversion generally emphasizes social, cultural, and emotional influences of accepting a new religious belief system but deemphasizes the veracity and influence of belief contents. Conversely, dialogue between Christians and Atheists often address ideological belief contents but often disregard the persuasive nature of social, cultural, and emotional components which affect such beliefs.

This research is being conducted in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding the primary reasons why an Atheist is motivated towards Christianity. This study seeks to take into account various aspects influencing a change of belief, ranging from intellectual, evidential components to social, cultural, and emotional factors.

The aim of this study is to determine the motivating influences for religious conversion, whether the convert is driven more by what Christianity functionally 'does' for them or what Christianity substantively 'is' relative to belief content; and, to broaden both the researcher's and Christian's perspective to incorporate a more balanced understanding, study, and interaction regarding the integrated motivations underlying religious conversion.

WHOSE VIEWS DO WE WANT?

I am looking for those individuals who have converted from Atheism (expressed disbelief in the existence of God) to Christianity, ages 18 and older living in Western culture, who would be willing to share their conversion story through completion of a brief questionnaire and interview.

WHAT DOES IT INVOLVE?

Participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire in which you will be asked questions about your family and religious history, your views as an Atheist, as well as your conversion process. The questionnaire should take no more than 30-60 minutes to complete. This will be followed by an interview with the primary researcher to further clarify issues surrounding your conversion. The interview will be conducted in person if possible; however, should distance preclude such, an interview will be conducted on Skype or alternatively via phone. The interview should last approximately one hour.

CONFIDENTIALITY GUARANTEED

I am not collecting information that can be used to identify you, and your answers to the questions will be held completely confidentially. Some personal questions about you and your family history will be asked in order to see whether some groups of people have different perspectives towards the existence of God than other groups of people. Your answers to these questions will not be used to identify you.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this research. You should read this information sheet and if you have any questions you should ask the researcher. You should not agree to take part in this research until you have had all your questions answered.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IF I TAKE PART?

If you decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form. Next, I will forward the online questionnaire to you for completion at your convenience. After completion, I will arrange an interview with you that will meet with your schedule. On request you will be given an interview topic guide. I will arrange to interview you in person in a private area (for confidentiality reasons) or suitable public venue; or, if distance precludes an in-person interview, an interview via Skype or phone will be confirmed.

The interview will take approximately one hour and be based on the interview topic guide, but it is designed to be flexible so as to meet your needs. The interview will be recorded, subject to your permission. Recordings of the interviews will be deleted after transcription. Even if you have decided to take part, you are still free to cease your participation at any time and to have research data/information relating to you withdrawn without giving any reason.

INCENTIVES

There is no financial incentive to participate in this research.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OF TAKING PART?

There are no foreseeable risks in participating in the study. The main disadvantage to taking part in the study is that you will be donating approximately 1½-2 hours of your time to take part. It is possible that you may find answering some of the questions challenging. This is unlikely; but, if it were to occur the interview could be terminated at any time.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

There are no direct benefits from taking part. However, the information obtained from the study will help to influence current research and help promote insight into and dialogue between those of diametrically opposed worldviews. Furthermore, I will provide you with a summary describing the main findings.

WILL MY TAKING PART BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

What is said in the questionnaire and interview is regarded as strictly confidential and will be held securely until the research is finished. Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you change your mind, you are free to stop your participation and to have your data withdrawn without any reason up to the point of dissertation completion (2016). All data for analysis will be anonymised. In reporting on the research findings, I will not reveal the names of any participants or the organization where you work. At all times there will be no possibility of you as individuals being linked with the data. All recordings of data on audio-equipment will be deleted after transcription. If you ask me to withdraw your data at any time before 2016 I will remove all traces of it from the records.

WHAT WILL WE DO WITH THE RESULTS OF OUR RESEARCH?

I will produce a final report summarizing the main findings, which will be sent to you. I also plan to disseminate the research findings through publication and conferences in both the US and UK.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

First, your consent is required in order to participate in the research project. Following your agreement, a copy of the online questionnaire will be forwarded you for completion.

WHO SHOULD I CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

Please telephone Jana Harmon at [REDACTED] (US) or email her at jxh340@bham.ac.uk for more information.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

12.3. Consent Form

Department of Theology and Religion

CONSENT FORM

Project: Religious Conversion from Atheism to Christianity in Western Culture
Investigator: Jana Harmon
Sponsor: University of Birmingham
Course: Theology and Religion

Please initial box

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I agree to take part in the above study. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I understand that if, after the interview has taken place, I lose my mental capacity to give consent, what I said in the interview would still be used in the study. | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Please tick box

- | | Yes | No |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 5. I agree to the interview being audio recorded. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I agree to the use of anonymized quotes from my interview in publications, reports, and the final thesis relating to this study. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. I agree that the data gathered in this study may be stored (after it has been anonymized) for the purposes of research and any future questions relating to it. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Name of Participant Date Signature

Researcher Date Signature

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

page 1	
1. Thank you for your participation in this vital study on religious conversion. We appreciate your willingness to complete this confidential questionnaire.	
(a)	Date of Birth
	_ / _ / _ [mm/dd/yyyy]
(b)	Gender (Select one option)
	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female
(c)	Country (Select one option)
2. Date of questionnaire completion:	
_ / _ / _ [mm/dd/yyyy]	
3. Highest level of education (Select one option)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	high school
<input type="checkbox"/>	some college
<input type="checkbox"/>	college degree
<input type="checkbox"/>	graduate degree, Masters
<input type="checkbox"/>	graduate degree, PhD
<input type="checkbox"/>	post-graduate study
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please specify) _____
4. Personal Religious History	
(a)	Father's religion (if any)
<hr/> <hr/>	

(b) Mother's religion (if any)

(c) Family religious practice (if any)

(d) My religious affiliations prior to Atheism (if any)

(e) Any other religious affiliations

5. I was raised in a (Select one option)

☐

two parent home, married

☐

two parent home, unmarried

☐

single parent home

☐

Other (please specify) _____

6. Chronological History

Age at which I became an Atheist _____

Year at which I became an Atheist _____

Age at which I became a Christian _____

Year at which I became a Christian _____

Present age _____

Birth order _____

7. As an Atheist, which most characterized your perspective? (Select one option)

☐

I strongly affirmed God's non-existence.

☐

I claimed to lack a belief in God.

☐

I considered belief in God as dangerous and sought its removal from the public square.

☐

I did not care whether or not God existed.

☐

Other (please specify) _____

8. As an Atheist, I viewed God as a(n): (please select all that apply)



harmless, irrational projection of psychological need



abusive, malevolent, fictional figure



dangerous delusion



idealized father figure



embarrassing belief



uncaring / absent in the lives of those who do believe



potential reality



mere social belief



irrelevant belief



Other (please specify) _____

9. As an Atheist, I viewed Jesus as a: (please select all that apply)



good moral teacher



deluded man with illusions of grandeur



social revolutionary



man who deceived for selfish gain



historical figure, nothing more



man who grew through legend into God



myth



Other (please specify) _____

10. As an Atheist, I viewed Christianity as: (please select all that apply)



a dangerous religious sect



intolerant



a man-made religion



non-relevant



good for moral training



good towards promoting social justice



judgmental



a false, antiquated, and/or superstitious ideology



Other (please specify) _____

11. As an Atheist, I viewed Christians as: (please select all that apply)



good, sincere people



educated



hypercritical



morally upright



irrational, deluded



holding positive, purposeful view on life



intolerant



holding negative, critical view on life



uneducated, superstitious



weak, needy



Other (please specify) _____

12. As an Atheist, I thought that God did not exist and such 'truth' was: (please select all that apply)



knowable, objective and rational. I had no doubt that God did not exist.



known through logical reasoning.



known through scientific investigation.



known through experience.



questionable/tentative; I doubted my Atheism at times.



the only possible option; truth excluded any supernatural or transcendent reality



essentially unknowable.



not absolute or certain due to human limitation of knowledge.



Other (please specify) _____

13. As an Atheist, my primary reason(s) for disbelief in God and Christianity was/were: (please select all that apply)



negative personal experience with Christian people



intolerance of Christians



lack of objective evidence for God, historical



personal pain in my life



lack of objective evidence for God, scientific



lack of subjective evidence for God, personal



suffering in the lives of others



negative social consequences of belief



unanswered prayer



irrationality of Christian belief



negative vocational consequences for belief



lack of exposure to Christian belief, generally



irreconcilability between science and religion



moral constraints on personal behavior



unwillingness, lack of desire for belief



religious hypocrisy of Christian leaders



supernatural claims of the Bible



religious hypocrisy of Christian institutions



lack of objective evidence for God, philosophical



Other (please specify) _____

14. As an Atheist, I seriously contemplated the implications of my worldview regarding the absence of: (please select all that apply)



ultimate purpose and meaning in my life



substantial explanation for origin of the universe or origin of life



life after death



reality beyond the physical/material universe



ultimate foundations for determining ethical standards of right and wrong



not absolute or certain due to human limitations of knowledge



objective grounds for free will



I justified the negative implications of Atheism



objective grounds for rationality and truth



I ignored the negative implications of Atheism



meaningful grounds for consciousness



Other (please specify) _____

15. As an Atheist, I found my worldview to be satisfying: (please select all that apply)



Intellectually: it provided substantive, rational answers to issues of life and reality.



Vocationally: it fostered professional respect.



Emotionally: it provided meaning and purpose to life and living



Aesthetically/artistically: it generated meaningful literary and artistic expression.



Socially: it fostered relational acceptance and enriched relationships with others.



I did not find Atheism to be generally satisfying, but soberly accepted it as truth.



Morally: it allowed freedom in personal choices.



Other (please specify) _____

16. As an Atheist, the extent to which I was convinced of the truth of my worldview: (Select one option)

uncertain 0	1	2	3	4	highly certain 5

17. As an Atheist, I was open to the theistic worldview: (please select all that apply)



Intellectually: I seriously considered evidence and depth of thought presented by Christian writers and thinkers.



I was neither actively seeking nor avoiding truth about God.



Emotionally: I desired the meaningful, contented lives of Christians.



I intentionally avoided and/or refuted any evidence which positively affirmed God's existence.



Morally: I appreciated the moral integrity of Christians.



I wanted to believe that Christianity was true, but couldn't.



Socially: I enjoyed close relationships with Christians.



I did not want to believe that Christianity was true.



I actively, authentically searched for truth about God.



I did not think anything would be sufficient to change my Atheistic worldview.



Other (please specify) _____

18. As an Atheist, I began asking questions about Christianity in order to: (please select all that apply)



seek greater meaning, purpose, and happiness in my life



cope with a significant life crisis



resolve growing tensions between my worldview and my intellectual understanding of the world.



respond to a religious/mystical experience



resolve growing tensions between my worldview and my emotional well-being.



respond to a dream or vision



satisfy a significant relationship(s) in my life



disprove and/or discredit Christianity



find a sense of belonging, acceptance, and social community



I was not asking questions about Christianity prior to conversion.



Other (please specify) _____

19. I began seeking answers about Christianity through: (please select all that apply)



searching internet blogs



joining a small group



listening to religious radio talk shows



watching internet debates



seeking out a religious authority or expert



searching through social media



listening to Christian podcasts



reading the Bible



asking for guidance through prayer



asking family member, friend



reading other religious literature or books



I was not seeking answers in Christianity prior to conversion.



asking Christian acquaintance



watching religious television broadcasts



going to church or religious event



listening to religious music



Other (please specify) _____

20. As an Atheist, when interacting with Christians regarding issues pertaining to the reality of God's existence, I generally found them to be: (please select all that apply)



open to and/or initiating substantive discussions



winsome and confident



unable to respond to my questions



good, discerning, interested listeners



informed regarding content of Christian beliefs and worldview



able to ask good questions



defensive



uninformed regarding content of Christian beliefs and worldview



unable or unaware of the need to ask good questions



more prone to talk than listen



lacked knowledge and understanding of scientific evidence



closed to and/or avoiding interactive dialogue



able to substantively respond to my questions



Other (please specify) _____

21. As an Atheist, these intellectual 'arguments' seemed most compelling as rational evidence for the existence of God: (please select three) [Please select at most 3 options.]



the beginning of the universe demands a transcendent cause



consciousness



historical person and resurrection of Jesus



rationality/order and fine tuning of the universe



grounds for rationality



rational arguments were not convincing



foundation for objective moral standards



truth, beauty, and goodness



Christian worldview rationality, coherence and livability



origin of life



textual reliability of the Bible



complexity of the cell / origin of information



Christian worldview explanation of reality, of human nature



Other (please specify) _____

22. As an Atheist, I found these personal aspects of Christianity most appealing: (please select all that apply)



forgiveness and acceptance by God



generosity of love and gratitude



personal relationship with God



social belonging and new community



moral boundaries



aesthetic depth, creativity and meaningful expression



heightened personal purpose and value



comfort and compassion



assurance of life after death



joy, peace, hope, and security



intellectual respectability



contentment / satisfaction in life



Other (please specify) _____

23. As an Atheist, the most effective means by which I was attracted to and/or convinced of the Christian faith was through: (please select all that apply)



observing Christians' lives



encountering a religious experience with God



searching for meaning and purpose in life



making a decision to open myself to truth



joining in religious activities



the personal care and concern from a Christian



intentionally ask God to reveal himself, to reveal truth



investigating the evidences for Christianity



experiencing a personal life crisis



observing the rationale of knowledgeable Christians regarding their beliefs



Other (please specify) _____

24. As a Christian looking back, my Atheism was primarily due to: (please select all that apply)



Intellectual reasons: perceived rational superiority of Atheism over any other worldview



Positive life experience: no perceived need of God



Personal reasons: desire to make life choices without moral restraint



Social reasons: Influences from significant life relationships, social acceptability



Negative life experiences: personal pain and suffering fostered doubt and disappointment with God



Professional / academic pressures for peer respect and/or promotion



Evil, pain, and suffering in the world caused doubt regarding God's existence



Intellectual reasons: perceived incompatibility between science and religious belief



Other (please specify) _____

Worldview Choices

25. Select general contextual influences which contributed to your belief in Atheism and/or religious conversion to Christianity, if any.

	Atheism	Christianity	Both	Neither	N/A
(a) My school environment encouraged my belief in: (Select one option)					
(b) As a child, my family encouraged my belief in: (Select one option)					
(c) Growing up, my community encouraged belief in: (Select one option)					
(d) As a child, I was exposed to (Select one option)					
(e) Today, my family encourages my belief towards belief towards: (Select one option)					
(f) Today, my culture (media, technology, arts/music/film generally encourages my beliefs towards: (Select one option)					
(g) Today, society places obstacles in the way of practicing: (Select one option)					
(h) Current social and political influences encourage belief of: (Select one option)					

Worldview Choices

26. Select personal influences which contributed to your belief in Atheism and/or religious conversion to Christianity, if any.

	Atheism	Christianity	Both	Neither	N/A
(a) An illness, death, or personal trauma contributed towards my: (Select one option)					
(b) My low sense of self-worth contributed to my: (Select one option)					
(c) My healthy relationship with my mother contributed to my: (Select one option)					
(d) My troubled or absent relationship with my mother contributed to my: (Select one option)					
(e) My troubled or absent relationship with my father contributed to my: (Select one option)					
(f) My spouse or significant relationship contributed to my belief in: (Select one option)					
(g) My high sense of self-worth contributed to my: (Select one option)					
(h) A divorce/relationship breakup contributed to my: (Select one option)					

(i) My healthy relationship with my father contributed to my belief in: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(j) A quest for meaning and purpose in life contributed to my: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(k) My negative life experiences led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(l) My positive life experiences led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(m) A quest for emotional fulfillment led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(n) My moral choices led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag

Worldview Choices

27. Select intellectual influences which contributed to your belief in Atheism and/or religious conversion to Christianity, if any.

	Atheism	Christianity	Both	Neither	N/A
(a) Growing awareness of the tensions in my world contributed to: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(b) Growing awareness of pain and suffering in the world contributed to my: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(c) Doubts and uncertainties led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(d) Unanswered questions led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(e) Gaining information via technology influenced me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(f) Intellectual discussion, issues of evidence and objective truth influenced me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(g) Religious claims led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(h) My choice towards belief was sudden towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(i) My choice towards belief was gradual towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(j) I was not actively seeking belief in: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(k) Scientific claims led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(l) My high school education led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(m) My college education led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(n) My tendency to question led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag
(o) I was actively seeking belief in: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag

Worldview Choices

28. Select social influences which contributed to your belief in Atheism and/or religious conversion to Christianity, if any.

	Atheism	Christianity	Both	Neither	N/A
(a) Encounter(s) with a Christian led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag	<input type="checkbox"/> The Bible d imag

(b) A friend or family member's life led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect
(c) A friend or family member's religious discussions with me contributed to my: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect
(d) Attending a religious service contributed to my: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect
(e) Apart from the influence of others, I independently chose to believe in: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect
(f) Social acceptance led me towards: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect
(g) I was pressured towards belief in: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect
(h) I joined in group activities prior to believing in: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect
(i) I believed before I joined in group activities with: (Select one option)	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect

29. My primary reason(s) for changing towards belief in God and conversion to Christianity was/were: (please select all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	positive personal experience with religious people	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	positive social consequences, a sense of belonging	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	positive emotional consequences, a sense of purpose, meaning, and fulfillment
<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	helps deal with personal pain in my life	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	positive vocational consequences for belief	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	positive intellectual consequences, deepened rational understanding of God, the world, and myself
<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	helps understand suffering in the lives of others	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	objective moral grounding	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	evidence for the resurrection of Jesus
<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	rationality of Christian belief	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	truth of the Bible	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	the life and claims of Jesus Christ
<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	reconcilability between science and religion	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	objective evidence for God, philosophical	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	a change in my willingness to be open, to seek truth
<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	religious lives of Christian leaders	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	objective evidence for God, historical	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God
<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	Christian church	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	subjective evidence for God, personal	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	a religious / mystical experience
<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	loving actions of Christians	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	answered prayer		
<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	objective evidence for God, scientific	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	exposure to Christian belief, generally		
<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	Other (please specify) _____				

30. As a Christian, I believe that knowledge and truth regarding the existence of God is: (please select all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	knowable, objective and rational; I am confident that God exists	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	known through logical reasoning	<input type="checkbox"/> The link d imag e can ot be el ect	known through evidence / historical methodology
--	--	--	------------------------------------	--	---



compatible with scientific knowledge



known through experience



subjective and relative to particular culture and language



questionable/tentative; I doubt my Christian belief at times.



known through divine revelation



essentially unknowable, but believed by blind faith



not confident due to human limitation of knowledge



Other (please specify) _____

31. As a Christian, the extent to which I am convinced of the truth of my worldview: (Select one option)

uncertain 0	1	2	3	4	highly certain 5

32. Please provide a brief summary of your conversion from Atheism to Christianity.

33. In your opinion, what is the most effective way to influence an Atheist towards Christianity?

34. If you would like to add or clarify information related to any of the above please feel free to do so here:

35. Thank you for taking time to complete this questionnaire. Your perspective is highly valuable and appreciated in this research study.

12.5. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Religious Conversion from Atheism to Christianity in Contemporary Western Culture

Interview Questions

Date: _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

Cell phone number: _____ **Email address:** _____

Sex: (please circle): M F

Birthdate: (month/day/year): _____ **Occupation:** _____

Thank you for your participation in this vital study. We appreciate your willingness to be interviewed.

1. Were you religiously active at all when you were younger? Please explain.

2. Were your family and/or friends religiously active at all when you were younger? Please explain.

3. As an Atheist, what was your impression of religion generally, of Christianity specifically?

4. As an Atheist, what was your impression of Christians?

5. As an Atheist, what led you away from religious belief?

6. As an Atheist, what led you towards religious belief? Describe your conversion.

7. Were there any particular experiences or events that led you toward religious belief? If so, explain.

8. Were there any particular intellectual questions that led you towards religious belief? If so, explain.

9. Did you ask anyone for help in dealing with your questions about religious belief? What was their response? Did it help? Why or why not?

10. Were there any particular relationships that led you towards religious belief? if so, explain.

11. Were there any particular emotional needs that led you towards religious belief? If so, explain.

12. What would you consider the most influential factor(s) in your conversion from Atheism to theistic belief, specifically Christianity?

13. How old were you when you began to consider yourself a Christian? What cost and/or benefit have you personally experienced from your Christian faith?

14. How have your friends/family responded to your shift from Atheism to Christian faith?

15. What would you say to another Atheist who is considering religious belief?

16. What would you say to another Christian who is trying to influence Atheists towards Christianity?

12.6. NVivo Interview Theme Nodes

Religious Conversion Theme Nodes

(1) ATTITUDE
Open positive
Neutral indifferent
Closed negative
(2) FUNCTIONAL
Emotional
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anger frustration • Arrogance • Contempt • Disappointment with Atheism • Disappointment with God • Fear • Honesty • Openness • Resistant will • Sadness depression
Existential
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis despair • Desire for God but untrue • Emptiness • Human condition • Identity • Longing for more • No perceived need
Experiential – Life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bad choices • Life change • Painful life experience • World brokenness

Moral
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If God, then • Moral culpability • Moral freedom • Moral grounding • Moral obligations
Social
Belonging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Church, social • Invite
Family
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atheistic family • Christian family
Friends
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atheistic friends • Christian friends
Christian
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal interaction • Relationship with Christian
Cultural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beauty and arts • Media
Religious Upbringing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childhood belief • Father, negative • Other religious influence • Raised no religion • Raised nominal religion • Raised religious <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Catholic ○ Protestant • Religious Education

(3) SUBSTANTIVE
Intellectual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atheist view of Atheism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atheist influencers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ University • Atheist belief <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Agnosticism ○ Cognitive dissonance ○ Declared Atheism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ apAtheism ▪ emotional Atheism ▪ existential Atheism ▪ experiential Atheism ▪ intellectual Atheism ▪ moral Atheism ▪ sociocultural Atheism ○ If God, then ○ Lack of grounding ○ Lack of reflection ○ Problem of evil ○ Science, logic, reason ○ Skepticism doubt ○ Superiority ○ Unchallenged
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ignored implications ○ No beauty ○ No destiny ○ No free will ○ No meaning ○ No mind ○ No morality ○ No origin ○ No truth ○ Understood implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atheist view of Religion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ View of Bible

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ View of Christianity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Anti-intellectual ▪ Bland boring harmless ▪ Dangerous ▪ Disgusting ▪ Emotional crutch ▪ Irrelevant ▪ Judgmental moralistic ▪ Lack of exposure ▪ Nonscientific ▪ Psychological construct ▪ Ridiculous ▪ Same as others ▪ Social construct
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ View of Christians <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Caricature ▪ Delusional ▪ Hypocritical ▪ Inauthentic ▪ Intolerant ▪ Living no differently ▪ Odd crazy weird ▪ Off-putting ▪ Sincere ▪ Stupid uneducated ▪ Unwarranted faith ▪ Weak
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ View of God
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ View of Jesus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quest towards Christianity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Changing Mind <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Belief but not ready ▪ Evidence and belief <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bible reliability • Christian scholarship • Jesus • Moral argument • Problem of pain • Resurrection • Science • Study evidence ▪ General belief in God ▪ Justified true belief ▪ Possibility of supernatural ▪ Reasonable faith ▪ Substance grounding function

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Searching <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Breaking stereotypes ▪ Church to learn ▪ Disprove God ▪ Independent ▪ Informed conversation ▪ Listening ▪ Not seeking
(4) CONVERSION EFFECTS
Others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance • Rejection
Self
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change • Church post-conversion • Ministry • Questions after conversion • Substantive Study
(5) APPROACH
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Acceptance openness ○ Attractive excellent ○ Following Jesus ○ Generous hospitality ○ Humility authenticity ○ Investment in others ○ Joyful, nice ○ Love ○ Patience perservice ○ Respect ○ Sincere belief ○ strength
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Church and apologetics • Mind <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Becoming knowledgeable <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ bible ▪ intelligent ○ Dealing with objections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Questions tactics ○ Imagination ○ Need for serious reflection

Conversation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Coercion ○ Discernment ○ Fear and boldness ○ Gentleness and respect ○ Language ○ Listening ○ Personal story ○ Winsome persuasion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holistic <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Emotional existential ○ Role of apologetics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Quest for truth ▪ Questioning ▪ Study Bible
Spiritual Experiential
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blindness and sight
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Trust in Christ
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encounter
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Beauty creation ○ Dark spiritual encounters ○ Dreams visions ○ Religious experience ○ Tv film music art
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Gospel ○ Prayer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Answered prayer ▪ Prayer for Atheist ▪ Prayer to God ▪ Unanswered prayer ○ Providential circumstances
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spirituality, Non-Christian <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Dark spirituality

12.7. Religious Conversion Patterns

Table 52. Substance Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern S1: SI High / SE Low / F Low

PATTERN	Atheism	Catalyst	Conversion	Post-Conversion
Substance Catalyst				
S1 (3/50) 6.0%		SI high SE low F low	SI high SE low/high (i) F low/high	SI+
Christopher strong Atheist age of Atheism: 18 age of conversion: 22 US; male	F soc mor SI no answers	SI lack in Atheism: objective morality origin of universe	SI non-Christian F soc roommate searching SI apologetics and church; belief but not conversion; F exp church broke stereotype SE(i) moral culpability	SI confirmation; apologetics ministry
Nicholas strong Atheist 14/29 US; male	SI no good reasons	SI Atheism's lack of moral and existential grounding, despairing implications	F soc uncle Oxford PhD theology book on evidence for resurrection; SI apologetics convincing (conversion '99% logical')	SI philosophy, theology apologetics; graduate study
Ashley strong Atheist 6/18 US; female	F soc Atheistic parents SI no answers	SI moral facts; strong personal morals but couldn't ground	SI apologetics F soc university informed Christian friends; debated ideas SE(i) mor culpability	SI apologetics writing and ministry

Table 53. Substance Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern S2: SI High / SE Low / F High

PATTERN	Atheism	Catalyst	Conversion	Post-Conversion
Substance Catalyst				
S2 (2/50) 04.0%		SI high SE low F high	SI high SE low F high	SI+
Jessica strong Atheist 19/28 US; female	F soc/- Christian legalism/hypocrisy F exp/emot- friend's death SI Atheistic books	F soc friends in other religions; renewed God search SE alt Eastern spirituality; beautiful but empty; SI Radio message prompted search towards Christianity	SI church to find truth; joined group to ask questions, study F exp positive Christian interaction; F will - anger turned to openness to pray; SI books, Bible, found 'real' God	Strong desire towards missions, others to know Christ.
Michelle strong Atheist 0/31 US; female	F soc home SI Christian substance untenable;	SI + mor facts F emot	F soc Christian fencing instructor; intelligent; mutual respect;	SI Graduate study in Christian Apologetics;

		+ beauty, imagination in Christian writing; SI cognitive dissonance; unable to ground beauty in Atheism	SI apologetics answered questions; F emot/SI imagination and reason cohered in Christian literature; enabled belief	employed as Christian academic.
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Table 54. Substance Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern S3: SI High / SE High / F High

PATTERN	Atheism	Catalyst	Conversion	Post-Conversion
Substance Catalyst				
S3 (2/50) 04.0%		SI high SE low F high	SI high SE high (i)(e) F high	SI+
Jeremy strong Atheist 13/17 US; male	F soc cult F exp/- with Christians; 'despised Christians' SI phil; existential nihilist F exist/exp/-; F emot/- depression and self-harm	SI no grounds for beauty, meaning, truth F soc met informed Christian, PhD philosophy; began intense intellectual search to discredit religion	SI studied philosophy w/PhD Christian; challenged nihilistic WV; SI read Bible, apologetics; 'magnetized to Jesus' F will/+ became open to search for truth; became convinced; 'came kicking and screaming' SE(i) prayed to know God as a 'curious agnostic' SE(e) profound spiritual encounter	SI read entire bible in 2 ½ mo following conversion; continued apologetics study; now employed as pastor
Heather weak Atheist 30/39 US; female	F will/+ open but religious belief not intellectually credible SI PhD science	F cult - moved to conservative town; challenged her science teaching; SI began searching arguments; SI/F soc/exp + observed knowledgeable, Christian in public interaction.	SI initiated contact w/Christian to discuss questions; became intellectually convinced SE(i)(e) God 'directly answered' her questions both internally and externally.	SI a persistent doubter by nature, continues to pursue truth and understanding but remains convinced.

Table 55. Substance Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern S4: SI Low / SE High / F Low

PATTERN	Atheism	Catalyst	Conversion	Post-Conversion
SUBSTANCE PRIMARY				
S4 (1/50) 02.0%		SI low SE high (e) F low	SI low SE high (e) F low	SI+
Melissa strong Atheist	SI no answers	SE(e) ongoing exp F exist /-emptiness	SE(e) ongoing exp	SI confirmation; apologetics blog

23/28 US; female	F hiddenness of God			
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Table 56. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern F1: F High / SI Low / SE Low

PATTERN	Atheism	Catalyst	Conversion	Post-Conversion
Function Catalyst				
F1 (1/50) 2.0%		F high SI low SE(i) low SE(e) low	F high SI low SE(i) low SE(e) low	SI low
Barbara weak Atheist 19/30 US; female	F socially active cultural Christian; F soc Atheist college roommate; lost Christian belief; F cult 1960s liberal; SI science	F cult/exp moved across country to southern US; F soc/+ son wanted to attend church (had attended w/Christian acquaintances)	F soc began attending church 'for the good of their children' F soc exp/+ positive experience with Christians; F will/+ open SI heard gospel; attended bible study	SI continued bible study; 'a solid belief in Jesus and His word'

Table 57. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern F2: F High / SI High / SE Low

PATTERN	Atheism	Catalyst	Conversion	Post-Conversion
Function Catalyst				
F2 (8/50) 16.0%		F high SI low SE(i) low SE(e) low	F high SI high SE(i) low SE(e) low	SI - low or SI+ high; SE(e) low
Sean weak Atheist 16/24 US; male	F soc cult SI	F soc Christian co- worker challenged him; began quest; SI sought to disprove God and the Bible; SI online bible study, church.	F exp/+ church diffused negative stereotypes; SI became intellectually convinced but initially resistant then converted	SI confirmation SE(e) relief from internal pain; feeling of being physically held, arms wrapped around him, loved, joy-filled (months post conversion); 'filled with the Holy Spirit'
Joseph weak Atheist 10/20 Australia; male	F soc cult F exist/+ no need for God; SI	F soc exist/- meaning, purpose; SI/F exp +mor facts ungrounded in Atheism	F soc/exp+ Christian; church broke negative stereotypes; SI apologetics – Christian WV had explanatory power	SI apologetics
Kyle strong Atheist 21/25 UK; male	F mor soc (university) SI Dawkins	F soc Atheist & Christian roommates; SI discussions prompted quest	SI apologetics; informed debaters; F will/+ became intellectually open; SI became convinced but initially resistant due to lifestyle; finally submitted	SI apologetics; active involvement in ministry

Ryan strong Atheist US 11/24 male	F soc cult SI science	F soc/+ girl – wife F soc/+ Christian friends F exist/- death SI conversations w/ knowledgeable Christians caused questioning	F will/+ became open; SI began avid listening reading apologetics; became convinced	SI Masters degree in apologetics
Anthony strong Atheist 12/19 UK; male	F nom Christian F soc cult SI science F exist/- no God, no meaning; F will/+ open but Christianity intellectually untenable	F soc exp + dated Christian girl,	SI investigated evidence; SI read Bible; SI/F attended church; F soc exp + Christian family; SI discussed issues w/ girlfriend's informed father; convinced of Christian truth; F will -/+ process before surrendering life	SI apologetics; graduate study in philosophy
Jennifer weak Atheist 14/24 Canada; female	F soc nom Catholic F cult exist/+ no need for God; F exp/- absent, abusive father; alcoholic mother	F soc exp/+ met Christian at university, intelligent, sincere F exist/- need for something more	SI university, culture of contemplation; discussions w/informed Christian diffused negative Christian stereotypes; dismantled Atheistic arguments F will/+ became open due to intelligence and exposure to 'real' Christianity; SI study of Bible, world religions; Christian writers; saw coherence, substantive truth of Christian worldview	SI published author, thinker, speaker, advocate of Christian worldview
Jason weak Atheist 14/29 US; male	F soc nom Cath; 'functional Atheist'; F soc Atheistic friends; F mor autonomy F exist/+ no need for God	F exist/- dissatisfied SI cog dissonance - origin of universe F soc – Christian wife returned to church; F soc exp/+ worked with informed Christian who 'lived it out'; discussed his beliefs	SI discussed questions w/informed Christian; began Bible study to investigate F soc began attending church w/wife; heard gospel; F exp/+ beauty of creation SI believed Christianity best explanation, although with doubts	SI continued study due to continued desire to seek truth; active in apologetics teaching and ministry; SE(i) personal experience, compelled by God to phone someone who became a Christian that day.
Amanda strong Atheist 19/22 US; female	F active Catholic SI science F mor	SI cog dissonance – evolution/purpose F exist/- meaninglessness	SI began investigating; apologetics; realized	SI continues strong rational, evidenced-based belief

	F will/+ open to God but untrue	F soc/exp + intelligent Christian broke negative stereotype	her life based on false ideology	
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Table 58. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern F3: F High / SI High / SE(i) High

PATTERN	Atheism	Catalyst	Conversion	Post-Conversion
Function Catalyst				
F3 (15/50) 30.0%		F high SI low SE(i) low SE(e) low	F low/high SI high SE(i) high SE(e) low	SI+ high
Michael strong Atheist 18/32 US; male	F soc active Catholic; mor freedom F exp problem of pain/evil; brain tumor F exist/+ no need	SE dark spirituality F emot/- depression F exp/+ job abroad; beauty of creation attributed to God's goodness;	F soc wife converted to Christianity; SI non-Christian books, investigated the Bible; SE(i) words in Bible 'alive'; 'felt like I could see for the first time' SE(i) mor culpable	SI confirmation;
John weak Atheist 13/21 UK; male	F soc cult SE(e) dark spiritual experiences	F soc girlfriend became Christian	F soc/exp + Christian couple – knowledgeable; SI answered questions re: Bible, provided evidence; SE(i) mor culpable	SI confirmation; Full-time apologetics ministry
Aaron weak Atheist 13/20 UK; male	F soc cult	F soc grandparents became Christian; prompted investigation	SI world religions; apologetics; bible SE(i) mor culpable	SI online apologetics ministry; graduate study in philosophy/ethics
William strong Atheist	F soc cult mor F exist/+ no need SI science, history	F soc/+ Christian co-worker, science teacher; diffused negative stereotype	SI began investigation into history, apologetics, bible study; weekly discussion w/Christian; SE(i) mor culpable	SI apologetics, theology, plans pursuit of graduate theological study
Jeff strong Atheist 7/26 UK; male	F emot exp/- Traumatic event	F soc/exp+ wife converted to Christianity; positive change in her life, F emot/- angry w/wife's conversion; F exp/emot+ met Christian couple valued, invested	SI questions answered by Christian couple in ongoing meetings and discussions; SE(i) answered prayer; peace	SI seminary; full-time ministry in apologetics and as pastor
Tom strong Atheist 4/29 US; male	F soc family F exist/+ no need SI	F exp lost twins; F soc wife became open to God F soc church w/wife	SI church bible study; sought pastor to find answers;	SI resolved science issues

		F exist/- felt 'darkness' in chest	SI read <i>Mere Christianity</i> given by Atheist sister; SE(i) mor culpable F exist/+ darkness left after conversion	
Tyler strong Atheist 15/20 US; male	F soc exist/+ no need for God SI	F exist/- meaning, purpose F soc friend became Christian	SI apologetics (read 41 books) SE(i) mor culpable	SI education in philosophy and apologetics
Joshua strong Atheist 22/28 US; male	F soc cult; mor; F exp- Christian hypocrisy; SI	F exist/emot - negative event (divorce); F soc/+ met Christian girl; F will/+ open	SI apologetics; informed Christian; SE(i) prayed to God	SI confirmed coherent worldview; truth/evidence on the side of Christianity
Adam strong Atheist 18/25 US; male	F soc cult mor F exp/- accident, lost leg; pushed further away from God; SI science	F exp emot exist/- lost in life, depressed SI/SE searched other religions; untenable	F soc+ Christian brother recommended bible SI bible/truth SE(i) mor culpable	SI apologetics, studies theology, plans further education
Charles weak Atheist 16/25 UK; male	F soc SI	F soc/+ dating Christian girl	SI apologetics F emot personal crisis SE(i) prayed to God	SI apologetics; academic
Brad strong Atheist 15/26 US; male	F mor; F exp/- Christian hypocrisy; SI science	F soc dated and married a Christian; F soc attended church for her; met with pastor who gave book to read	SI apologetics SI/SE(i) bible (God supernaturally exposing natural worldview); SE(i) mor culpable	SI graduate study in apologetics; full-time ministry
Paul strong Atheist 18/23 US; male	F soc mor F exp/- unanswered prayer; emot/- angry at God SI science	F exp/- life crisis; acute visual loss x2 F will/+ open F soc wife Christian ('not pushy')	F soc mother told him of Paul's conversion SE(i) began reading Bible, was 'moved' by Paul's story F soc aunt invited to church, Power Team testimonies SE(i) mor culpable; 'a God thing I can't explain'	SI 'pragmatic, practical guy' who wanted to ground his conversion experience in apologetics
George strong Atheist 11/16 US; male	F soc dad Atheist F cult 1960s SI science+	F exist/- Atheism flat; desired more; F will/+ F exp drug culture/ESP SE eastern spirituality	F Soc/SI random gospel presentations (tract), invitation to Christian concert, church; SI/F exp +mor facts SE(i) mor culpable	SI to ground and defend truth; apologetics
Richard strong Atheist 13/18 NZ; male	F soc cult SI science	F soc exp/+ Christian girl; Christian friends F exist/- meaning	SI gospel tract; gospel witness; knowledgeable Christian discussion SE(i) bible – gospel of John; believed, stopped cursing	SI apologetics ministry to defend beliefs in the church, in secular culture and in academia

Gary strong Atheist 10/17 US; male	F exp/- emot/- Abusive, absent, alcoholic father	F exp/- broken neck, life crisis	F soc exp/+ caring Christian nurse, community, youth pastor invested; F will/+ open SE(i) prayed to God	SI affirms rationality of belief or wouldn't sustain; SI creation
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1Table 59. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern F4: F High / SI High / SE(e) High

PATTERN	Atheism	Catalyst	Conversion	Post-Conversion
Function Catalyst				
F4 (8/50) 16.0%		F high SI low SE(i) low SE(e) low	F low/high SI high SE(i) high &/or SE(e) high	SI high &/or SE(e) high
Matthew strong Atheist 15/18 US; male	F exp/-alcoholic parents; problem of pain/evil; SI	F exist/- meaninglessness SI cognitive dissonance (origin of universe; moral facts) F will/+	SI read non-Christian (Koran), then Bible for months SE(i) began to pray SE(i) felt conviction of Holy Spirit while reading Bible; mor culpable	SI post-RC doubts led to SE(e) speaking in tongues and SI confirmation
Justin strong Atheist 0/25 France; male	F soc cult mor F exist/+ no need for God SI	F soc/+ new girlfriend Christian; prompted search to disprove Christianity	SI church; F soc/exp + Christian SE(e) church when leaving; turned him back to stay and seek further SI bible study SE(i) mor culpable	SI graduate study in theology; academic
Daniel strong Atheist 15/18 Australia; male	F soc mor SI	F exist/- F soc friend invited	F soc church/retreat SE(e) convincing 'numinous experience' at retreat; SI bible study SE(i) mor culpable	SI apologetics; podcast
Ben weak Atheist 14/22 Canada; male	F soc cult	F exist/- meaning purpose F emot /- depression; began independent quest for answers	SI world religions; bought/read bible; F soc asked questions of Christian friend; SI apologetics; believed but F- 'not willing'; SE(e) God answered prayer for personal experience (story revealed God to him)	SI
Todd strong Atheist 17/29 US; male	F soc cult F exist/+ no need for God SI	F soc/+ Christian wife; F soc/exp + church belonging	F soc/exp; SI church dismantled negative stereotypes of Christians & beliefs F will/+ became open SI + reliability of Bible; studied Bible SE(i) prayed; believed	SE(e) post-RC spiritual experience 'electrifying', confirmed belief; employed at a church

Greg strong Atheist 18/35 Canada; male	F soc cult mor SI science	F exist/- meaning purpose identity destiny F soc/exp + Christian wife and family	F exp Grandmother's death prompted questions re: life after death; SE(i) began reading Bible; drawn to scripture, Jesus SI investigated truth of bible SE(e) convincing 'mystical experience' humbled, believed SE(i) mor culp	SI apologetics study and teaching in church
Scott strong Atheist 12/31 France; male	F soc cult F emot/- depressed; F soc+ Atheistic father became a Christian due to spiritual experience; Exp/- father's death exist/- no meaning	F soc/exp + moved to US; stayed w/Christians; F exp/emot/exist – depression; 'cried out in desperation' SE(e) vivid mystical vision w/God/Jesus; experienced immediate, sustained happiness, peace, joy & love;	SI began serious quest SI apologetics, Bible x 1 ½ yrs– believed	SI apologetics study and debate
Ed strong Atheist 15/20 US; male	F nominal liberal Christian; F exist/+ no need for God; F mor anti- authority; SI science	F exist/- meaning purpose; F/SE soc/cult open to Eastern spirituality F exp/- drugs, low point	F exp/+ creation SI/F exp/+ mor facts/ conscience F soc friend Christian SI disprove Christianity SE started reading Bible; 'captivated' by scripture, Jesus; F soc invited to Bible study; SE(i) mor culpable; SE(e) 'supernatural conversion'	SI studied to test the truth of his experiential conversion; teaches apologetics at the graduate level.

Table 60. Function Catalyst Religious Conversion Pattern F5: F High / SI Low / SE(e)(i) High

	Atheism	Catalyst	Conversion	Post-Conversion
Function Catalyst				
F5 (10/50) 22.0%		F high SI low SE(i) low SE(e) low	F (low/high) SI low SE(i) high &/or SE(e) high	SI high SE(e) +/-
David weak Atheist to anti-theist 15/24 US; male	F soc emot exp /- parent divorce; F exp /- Christian hypocrisy	F exp emot /- heavy drug use; low point; F will /+ prayed to God for help	SE(e) answered prayer/circumstances; SI bible	SE(e) 'supernatural' delivery from drugs, tobacco, depression;

	F emot/- depression		SE(e) turned on television; heard the gospel and believed; SE(i) morally culpable	SI leads group apologetics studies
James strong Atheist/ anti-theist 16/20 US; male	F soc mor SI philosophy existentialism	F exp exist/- heavy drugs; low point; SE called out to God and Satan	F soc Christian cousin began speaking about Jesus; led into: SE(e) encounter w/Jesus SE(i) moral culp; SE(e) disturbing vision w/Satan one week later	SI confirmation; served as full- time missionary since conversion, convincing others of Christ
Steven strong Atheist 18/39 US; male	F soc cult exist/+ no need for God SI	F soc/exp wife w/cancer, became a Christian	F soc church for wife; SE(e) witnessed answered prayers and providential circumstances for wife; F will /+ became open; SI bible; apologetics	SI
Susan weak Atheist/ apAtheist 13/52 US; female	F soc cult F exist/+ no need	F soc friend became Christian; F will/- still not interested	SE(e) supernatural experience; (awakened middle of night; compelled to watch tv and heard the gospel; described significant experience of God) SE(i) mor culpable	SI bible study/theology
Timothy weak Atheist 19/24	F emot exp /- sister's illness, problem of pain/evil F mor SI college skeptics; Christian non- answers	F soc attended church with girlfriend (but hated it; walked out!)	SE(e) compelled to return to church 'by the Holy Spirit'; SE(i) immediately drawn to God through the gospel	SI post RC; bible study, apologetics; online interaction defending the Christian worldview with Atheists
Amy weak Atheist 0/20 US; female	F soc cult; exist/+ no need for God SI	F exp/- breakup; F exist/- meaning, identity F soc/+ given bible by Christian; Christian/God negative stereotypes broken	F exp accident F exist meaning purpose SE(e) dark dreams opened to spiritual realm; SI church to explore then stopped; F soc Christian invited to church; SE(i) mor culpable	SI apologetics; graduate degree; teaches at graduate level
Dennis weak Atheist 20/31 US; male	F soc exist/+ SI science	F exp/- life crisis; failing marriage	F exp sobering thunderstorm SE(e) 'encounter with the Holy Spirit opened my eyes'	SI cognitive dissonance; perceived dichotomy between faith and reason resolved through apologetics
Zach strong Atheist 14/18 UK; male	F nom Catholic F soc/friends F mor F exp/- death F exist/+ no need for God	F soc/+ Christian girl; F soc exp/+ Christian friends, events	SE(e) mystical exp during prayer x2 – F exist/- death F will/+ moved towards agnosticism, then deism and conversion	SI post- conversion doubt led to apologetics - 'need for evidence';

				studying philosophy at the graduate level
Carl weak Atheist 19/57 US male	F nominal Christian F mor SI sci	F soc/+ Christian wife; reluctantly had been attending church for one year F exp/- longstanding addiction to alcohol, gambling; debt; F exist/- low point	SE(i) mor culpable: 'cried out to God' and surrendered; SE(e) sudden maintained sobriety, cessation of gambling 'by God's strength' for nearly 20 years.	SI apologetics post-conversion to ground experiential conversion; teaches apologetics in church
Jacob strong Atheist 14/20 US; male	F soc active Christian F exp/emot/- Christian parents divorce; Father unfaithful; lost belief in 'caretaking God'; SI nihilism	F emot/- F exist/- no meaning, value, truth	F soc/exp/+ attended church for personal financial gain; F exp + positive exp w/Christians; began attending church F will + became open SE(e) answered prayer, God said 'hello'; 'met me where I was'; believed	SI apologetics; gaining rational aspect of belief

Table 61. Qualitative Analysis: Numerical Quadrant Religious Conversion Patterns

	Atheism	Catalyst	Conversion			Post Conversion	
Conversion Pattern	S / F	S / F	S / F	SI / SE	SEi / SEe	S / F	Subject
S1	2	1	2	1	1	1	5
S1	1	1	1	1	3	1	15
S1	1	1	2	1	1	1	27
S2	2	2	2	1	3		22
S2	1	1	2	1	3	1	29
S3	2	2	2	2	4	1	37
S3	1	4	2	1	1	1	38
S4	2	2	1	4	4	1	6
F1	4	4	4	3	3	3	47
F2	2	2	1	1	3	2	13
F2	4	4	4	1	3	1	20
F2	2	2	1	1	3	1	25
F2	2	4	1	1	3	1	41
F2	2	4	2	1	3	1	44
F2	4	2	1	1	3	1	45
F2	4	2	2	1	3	1	46
F2	2	2	1	1	3	1	50
F3	4	4	1	2	1	1	2
F3	4	4	2	2	1	1	4
F3	4	4	1	2	1	1	8
F3	2	4	2	2	1	1	10
F3	4	4	2	2	1	1	11
F3	4	4	2	2	1	1	12

F3	2	4	1	2	1	1	17
F3	2	4	1	2	1	1	18
F3	2	4	2	2	1	1	21
F3	2	4	2	2	1	1	24
F3	2	4	1	2	1	1	26
F3	4	4	2	4	1	1	36
F3	2	4	2	2	1	1	40
F3	2	4	2	2	1	1	42
F3	4	4	2	2	1	1	49
F4	2	2	1	2	1	1	7
F4	2	4	2	2	2	1	9
F4	2	4	2	2	2	1	16
F4	4	4	2	2	2	1	30
F4	2	4	2	2	1	1	31
F4	2	4	2	2	2	1	34
F4	2	4	2	2	1	1	35
F4	4	4	1	2	2	1	51
F5	4	4	1	4	2	2	1
F5	2	4	1	4	2	1	3
F5	2	4	2	2	4	1	14
F5	4	3	1	4	2	3	19
F5	2	3	1	4	2	1	23
F5	2	4	2	4	2	1	28
F5	4	4	2	4	4	1	32
F5	2	4	1	4	2	1	33
F5	4	4	2	4	4	1	39
F5	2	4	1	2	2	1	43
F5	2	4	2	4	4	1	48
Total 1s	4	4	19	14	21	45	
Total 2s	29	9	29	25	11	2	
Total 3s	0	2	0	1	12	2	
Total 4s	17	35	2	10	6	0	
	50	50	50	50	50	49	

12.8. NVivo 12 - Narrative Theme Node Coding

Table 62. Narrative Theme Node Coding

ATH Stage	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ATH Canonical Txt • ATH Context & Community • ATH Experience • ATH Identity • ATH Purpose & Meaning • ATH Sense-Making Emotional • ATH Sense-Making Intellectual • ATH Spiritual
CAT Stage	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CAT Canonical Txt • CAT Context & Community • CAT Experience • CAT Identity • CAT Purpose & Meaning • CAT Sense-Making Emotional • CAT Sense-Making Intellectual • CAT Spiritual •
CON Stage	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CON Canonical Txt • CON Context & Community • CON Experience • CON Identity • CON Purpose & Meaning • CON Sense-Making Emotional • CON Sense-Making Intellectual • CON Spiritual
PCON Stage	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PCON Canonical Txt • PCON Context & Community • PCON Experience • PCON Identity • PCON Purpose & Meaning • PCON Sense-Making Emotional • PCON Sense-Making Intellectual • PCON Spiritual

12.9. Narrative Analysis Findings: Narrative Language, Themes and Biographical Shifts

12.9.1. Canonical Text

Table 63. Canonical Text Narrative Themes

CANONICAL TEXT Narrative Themes	Pre-conversion Metanarrative OLD TEXT Atheism themes	Catalyst Narrative CHANGING TEXT themes	Conversion Narrative NEW TEXT themes	Post-Conversion Metanarrative CANONICAL TEXT Christian themes
	Outside the Christian text	Hearing the text	Reading the text	Inside the text
	Believing naturalistic Atheism texts	Reading the text	Believing the text	Using text language
	Disproving Christian text	Disproving the text	Text reading me	Believing the text
	Lack of exposure or negative exposure to Christian text	Comparing texts	Using text language	Living the text
		Studying the text		Transformed by the text
		Believing the text		Studying / Defending the text

Table 64. Canonical Text shift: ‘Reading the Text’ to ‘Text Reading Me’

Canonical Text BR Shift	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative	Post-Conversion Metanarrative
	Reading the Text	Text Reading Me
S3 #37 Jeremy	<p>Atheism:</p> <p>Jeremy first read the bible in order to disprove it: ‘I approached it [the bible] first as, ‘How can I dismantle this? How can I show that it isn’t true? That it doesn’t match with reality?’ And I very quickly, I had to avoid Atheist literature just because the debater and the editor in me and this scholar in me, I couldn’t handle it. The popular level Atheist writings are, they are garbage, scholastically speaking...I discovered very quickly that they were taking out of context and they were manipulating. And I thought, well, your arguments cannot be that great if you have to rely on manipulation.’</p>	<p>Post-Conversion:</p> <p>Jeremy read the bible in 2 ½ months in order to know the ‘big grand story’: ‘I had about 2 ½ months before I went to college. I wanted to get the lay of the land, so I read 16 chapters per day, just really religiously. I wouldn’t do anything else until I had gotten through those 16 chapters to see the big grand story.’</p> <p>As a Christian, Jeremy finds himself in the bible, comparing his own conversion story to Paul and Moses: ‘And it is funny, the theological people compare me to Paul. Here's a guy who was struck blind, but here is a guy who is proud of his intelligence, trained at the best schools in the world, he was the proudest, the be all end all, the next in line to be the big-time guy and it was like, yeah, let’s stop playing those games. Let’s put down the books and see what actually is there. It was an incredibly humbling experience. It was really strange though. I have no real words for it.’</p> <p>‘The story of Moses resonates so deeply with me. I reread Exodus 33 so many times a year because I love that. Maybe that has a lot to do</p>

		<p>with my conversion process, this crying out. I think if we understand fundamentally God's glory, it solves so many abstract discussions about goodness or morality or all of that kind of stuff. It just really is. It is what it is. He is the I AM.'</p>
<p>F2 #45 Jennifer</p>	<p>Atheism: As an Atheist, Jennifer's exposure to the bible was limited: 'And I went through 20 years of public education and was never required to read the Bible which I find shocking in and of itself. <i>I could be a literature major and not be required to read the Bible. I had read bits and pieces here and there.</i></p> <p>Catalyst: At graduate school, she began to read the bible: 'And I had this <i>culture of contemplation</i>. I actually read the Bible for myself.' <i>'I found the Bible compelling when I began to actually read it.'</i></p>	<p>As Jennifer began reading the bible, she found it compelling and 'found herself' in it: 'And I was struck by such gospel stories as the man who says, 'Lord help me in my unbelief.' <i>Because I realized everything was in the Bible. Every single part of us could be found in some part of the Bible</i> and that was even my last hiding place was 'Well, I want to believe but I can't.' Even when I got to that point. 'Sorry, God or whoever you are, I can't believe.' And that was even addressed. <i>And so, there was nowhere to hide.'</i></p> <p>As she began to read the bible, she saw how the narrative made sense as related to herself and her experience of the world: 'For one, just reading the bible and thinking about it and <i>having it work on my heart</i>. Just reading it...I remember when I read Genesis for the first time and I thought, '<i>This makes a lot of sense.</i>'...when I read it, I thought, '<i>Wow, [it] makes sense. There is something wrong with our world. There is something in me that craves something better. Where does that craving come from?</i>' All of that made sense.'</p>
<p>S1 #05 Christopher</p>	<p>Catalyst:</p> <p>When he began reading the bible, Christopher read it critically but with an emotional draw towards Jesus and the epistles: 'Apart from Jesus and the Gospels, I had a critical eye towards everything else. And it was pretty easy for me to almost dismiss the Old Testament out of hand... <i>The emotional draw that I was having was very much towards the person of Jesus</i> and the epistles at that point didn't even make any sense to me. The Old Testament seemed to be outdated and barbaric. So, it was a tough place, making sense of all of those things.'</p> <p>[Christopher also describes encountering a spiritual experience when he was first reading the bible, particularly reading about the person of Jesus. (See CAT Spiritual)]</p>	<p>Reading through the bible, Christopher reluctantly found the 'text reading him' as a sinner: '<i>Belief that I was a sinner, that I needed forgiveness and needed to repent was a really tough idea for me to work through.</i> I felt like I had spent so much of my life over the past couple of years hearing incessantly that 'Everything is okay, do what you want, this is okay, that's okay.' So, to have all of a sudden both an internal and external source, because my own conscience was starting to change, and then also <i>reading through the Bible</i>, having internal and external confirmation that that wasn't the case was really jarring for me. It wasn't necessarily attractive either even with the offer of forgiveness attached to it. <i>It was hard to see myself in that light. I had a lot of pride and didn't want to see myself in that light. I didn't want to think I had done things wrong and I didn't want to think that I had sinned and needed forgiveness.</i> So, that was really a tough adaptation for me.'</p>

Table 65. Canonical Text shift: ‘Outside the Text’ to ‘Inside the Text’

Canonical Text BR Shift	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative Outside the Text	Post-Conversion Metanarrative Inside the Text
S1 #15 Nicholas	Atheism: Nicholas looked to the canons of science, logic and reason to conclude that God does not exist: <i>I felt like disbelief was the only reasonable and logical conclusion you could make. And maybe, we could say we are not quite sure there is a God, but you certainly could not say that there is a God because of science and the advances that we have had.</i>	Post-Conversion: Nicholas became interested in ‘reconnecting’ with early Christians through church liturgy as well as through understanding and living out the bible story: <i>‘I started getting very curious about the early church fathers like Polycarp and St. Paul And the traditions that Christianity had up until now. And, in a sense, I felt like going to church was reconnecting me with the early Christians, almost carrying it on like the early Christians had done. So, it just felt very, very personal to me.’</i>
S3 #37 Jeremy	Atheism: As a self-proclaimed ‘existential nihilist’ and Atheist, Jeremy’s foundational and formational texts consisted mainly of philosophy: <i>‘I started reading things like Heidegger, and very quickly ended up reading Foucault and getting into this world where I was like ‘Wow, these were these really heavy thoughts...There was nobody I could talk to about Heidegger, Camus, Kant, all of these people that I had been reading.’</i>	Post-Conversion: Jeremy perceives himself and his purposes as part of the church’s mission in ‘big grand story ‘of God: <i>‘Really that is what we are called to do as a church is to be a vehicle, to be His hands and feet in this world.’ ‘That is really what we as Christians have the unique privilege of doing, of carrying a little bit of God’s glory and His love and His goodness and His beauty into a world that really has no fundamental understanding of those things. I think that is the true call to holiness, not so we can say, “Look at us. We are better and have a more interesting worldview.” It is saying, “This is what you were meant for. You deeply crave this, and we want to show it to you in its most perfect form the way that we can.”</i>
F5 #01 David	Atheism: David tried to convince Christians of the bible’s untrustworthy nature: <i>‘Before I was a Christian, not only did I have that strong hatred of Christians, I would verbally battle we Christian and try to get them to turn away from God. One of my favorite arguments was something that I picked in college that I never even checked. It was like “Oh, I like that.” I would tell Christians that you can’t trust the Bible because the Roman Catholic church edited it in the 15th Century and they took out all of the parts that they didn’t like so you don’t know what is in there.’</i>	Post-Conversion: As a Christian, David reads through the entire bible every year, and contends bible reading is a critical part of being a Christian as ‘life’: <i>So very early on, right after I started going to church, I found in some magazine something about reading the bible in a year. I have done that for years since I have gotten saved. I change translations every year and I try to get a study Bible so that I can read all of the commentary all along with it. I still do it every morning...It is life for you. And I have gotten to the point where I get something from the word every morning almost. I just adore it. I can’t get enough of it.’</i>

12.9.2. Context and Community

Table 66. Context & Community Narrative Themes

CONTEXT & COMMUNITY Narrative Themes	Pre-conversion Metanarrative OLD Atheism themes	Catalyst Narrative CHANGING themes	Conversion Narrative NEW themes	Post-Conversion Metanarrative NEW Christian themes
Culture	Actively religious	Actively religious community challenged view		Active cultural engagement - purposed towards 'reaching culture'
	Nominally religious	Nominally religious		
	Minimal/no or negative exposure to Christians or Christianity	Interaction with different religious contexts/cultures		
	Negative cultural messaging and stereotyping of Christians and Christianity	New context and/or community (university, city, job, home, people)		
	University – 'anti-Christian' sentiment			
Social Community (family/friends) (church)	Actively religious	Positive interactions and relationships with Christians – experientially and/or intellectually	Church attendance, teaching, bible study, 'hear the gospel'	Intentional engagement in Christian community - Church, bible study, and/or ministry
	Nominally religious	Breakdown of negative stereotypes of Christians and Christianity	Church community belonging	Active community engagement – purposed towards 'reaching community'
	Non-religious, Atheist, and/or anti-religious	Begin church attendance, bible study, and/or apologetics study	No church attendance or belonging during conversion	
	Negative social community messaging and stereotyping of Christians and Christianity	No church attendance or belonging prior to conversion		

	Minimal/no or negative interaction with Christians	Independent search and study		Family members become Christians
	Negative family experiences cause disbelief in God	Loss of friends when open to God		Social ridicule, resistance, and/or estrangement from friends/family
	Family tension, disappointment in rejecting or leaving Christianity			Acceptance from Atheist and/or Christian friends/family

Table 67. Context & Community shift: ‘I Atheist’ to ‘I’ or ‘We’ Christian(s)’

Context & Community	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative autonomy ‘I Atheist’ to	Post-Conversion Metanarrative autonomy ‘I Christian’
	none	
Context & Community	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative autonomy ‘I Atheist’ to	Post-Conversion Metanarrative community ‘We Christians’
CONTEXT & COMMUNITY Biographical Reconstruction F2 #45 Jennifer	<p>Atheism: Jennifer grew up in a family and community that viewed religion as merely cultural: ‘I grew up in a loosely Catholic household, but without practicing a faith, really, and certainly no sense of a personal relationship with God or even objective understanding of Jesus. <i>The name Jesus seemed to be a cultural cliché.</i>’</p> <p><i>‘I grew up not trusting fathers as I had been abandoned by mine, and the road of my adolescence with him in particular was rocky. This informed my distrust of any spiritual father, by extension. My mother was very sweet but also very bitter, and so her Catholicism was empty of Jesus and a bit superstitious and double-edged.’</i></p> <p>Catalyst: At Oxford, Jennifer began to interact with intelligent, respectful Christians, opening her to the possible credibility of Christianity:³⁴⁹ ‘I think it was a combination of both head and heart. Yes, thinking</p>	<p>Catalyst (cont.) One thing that spoke to me was <i>hospitality</i> for instance. Christians who would have me for dinner or have me to their home or open their place for me to be restored. And, okay, you could say non-Christians do that too. Of course, they do as well. But there was <i>this gentleness and servitude and this intuitiveness</i>; and there were also <i>many ways in which they engaged me</i>. [She recalls a particular example.] It was just so foreign to me, that kind of <i>radical, ironically non-judgmental love.</i>’</p> <p>Post-conversion: Jennifer became actively engaged in the Christian culture and community: ‘In my own family (husband, children), we have a <i>wonderful church</i>, we spend time in the Word, we pursue relationship with <i>Christian friends</i>, listen to Christian music, movies etc. but we also very consciously <i>operate in the larger culture</i> (attend public school, <i>do ministry</i> on campuses etc.).’</p>

³⁴⁹ Jennifer experienced two types of Christians - one which turned her away from Christianity and another which opened and attracted her towards Christianity. Varieties of embodied belief can and do shape perception of a belief system, whether fairly or unfairly.

	<p>Christians who were able to some degree were able to answer my questions, but I don't think every question is answerable, but who were also <i>respectful, who treated me with dignity, who asked me questions.</i>³⁵⁰</p> <p>'And so, I was impressed by, as I began to meet more Christians, not only their intellectual rigor because some Christians are not academics - some of the Christians I was meeting were wives or husbands of people who were studying there, and they were doing something else or whatever... I also saw how he acted and treated people. I also saw other Christians I was beginning to know how they acted and treated people. In many ways they were <i>living out the gospel</i>. I just didn't know what that was yet...And it wasn't like they were these cheesy people either or unbelievably good or whatever. They were funny and down to earth and made mistakes or whatever too, but I saw this difference.³⁵¹</p>	<p>Since conversion, she has left her academic career to 'live out the gospel' to her 'unbelieving' family and friends, moving to another country: 'That is an ongoing prayer for me personally, still having so much of an unbelieving family and unbelieving friends. I come from a largely unbelieving world. I pray over that all the time...<i>And that was one of the main reasons we moved home, to try and love on my family up close and hopefully live the gospel and entice them to it and others as well in a way that wasn't just phone or email.</i> And I will say that one of the things I am trying to learn, and I do realize what a sinner I am and then I fall so short in it all the time, but <i>really trying to live out being available.</i>'³⁵²</p>
<p>CONTEXT & COMMUNITY Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F3 #36 John</p>	<p>Atheism: For John, 'There was no God' in his community: And, that's exactly where I grew up. It's hard to explain over here. <i>There was no God. There are punctuations of church. You are taken to assemblies at school, but you know kids – you are taken to church and there is some guy who is boring. You kick each other. You play games and you leave the church. It meant nothing. You heard nothing. But the general tenure of the culture was that there was no God. So, it wasn't anywhere on any map that would think of.'</i></p> <p>John's parents were not religious, and he had 'no markers' to interpret religion apart from cultural messages: 'My mom had been raised with Nazarene Christianity, but she left it when she was 17 to marry my dad. She walked away essentially...<i>There were just no markers, there was just nothing to interpret the</i></p>	<p>Catalyst (cont.): John met with his girlfriend's Christian friends and became more receptive towards conversation: 'So, I met Christians for the first time and really for hours they shared. I mean, I came in, I was smart mouthing at first that God was a bit of a non-entity in my mind. The wife, she was obviously an evangelist and they were smart...And, they were a young, modern couple – attractive, trendy. But, this feeling of innocence, something like that. So, of course they started sharing and we went back and forth.'</p> <p>Post-conversion: John had trouble separating from his prior community as his 'old friends' tried to de-convert him: 'Very noticeably too to <i>all of those around me because they were trying to reconvert me or de-convert me if you like, back into the world I had come from.</i> They thought, of course, it was emotional,</p>

³⁵⁰ This balanced understanding of both 'head and heart' as influential experiences affecting her perspective is insightful.

³⁵¹ Important factors changing Jennifer's negative stereotype of Christians included both their intellectual rigor as well as their embodied 'living out' of the Christian gospel through their attitudes, words, actions, and love This is an example of both functional and substantive influences working together towards producing a catalyst of changed perspective.

³⁵² During her Atheism, Jennifer was autonomous and individualistic – not a part of an Atheistic group. She became a part of a Christian community during her conversion process. Now she fosters strong Christian community and culture in her own family, part of a church.

	<p><i>experience other than the movies and the occult, wigi boards...we knew with the dead there might be spirits and powers, but what were they we didn't know! Relating that, then, to God, just didn't compute at all.'</i></p> <p>Catalyst: John's girlfriend became a Christian and asked him to consider Christianity, but he became angry: 'So, we had been together for about three years when this day <i>she walks in and says, 'What do you think about Jesus?'</i> And, <i>I had never thought a thing about Jesus. Why would I think about Jesus?</i></p>	<p>I'd been brainwashed by a cult. That was a common thing. They thought everything except that it was really God.'</p> <p>His family was mocked but his mother was relieved that John became a Christian: 'So when I first became a Christian, that same skepticism applied when I became a Christian, 'Oh, your son's got religion' kind of thing. So, there was still that mocking, humiliation kind of thing. <i>My mom...was really relieved. In fact, she bought me my first bible.</i> The next day, she went out and bought me my first Bible. She realized that I would either be locked up or dead, which happened to a lot of my friends.'</p> <p>John became part of a strong community of Christians, both personally and professionally.</p>
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Table 68. Context & Community shift: 'We Atheists' to 'We Christians'

Context & Community	Pre-conversion Meta-narrative community 'We Atheists' to	Post-conversion Metanarrative community 'We Christians'
<p>CONTEXT & COMMUNITY Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #20 Joseph</p> <p>Socio-cultural influence was strong in both creating barriers to religious belief as well as tearing them down in order to enable belief.</p>	<p>Atheism: Joseph Atheism and contempt for religion were informed by negative messages from his family, culture and media: 'The joke I tell people is, you know growing up, I was born in 1974 so having my teenage years mostly in the early 1990s. <i>Growing up the most visible image of Christianity I ever saw was Ned Flanders from the Simpsons. That was the primary Christian image that I could identify.</i> In terms of what Christians believed, it was something along the lines of Ned Flanders.'</p> <p>'...I would say in Australia, for a big part of the population, particularly for the cultural elites, religion is regarded as like pornography. It is a horrible, dirty, disgusting thing that we allow people to do because we live in a free society, but it should be kept in a paper bag where people don't have to see it or be affronted by it. And I think that is very much where we are now.'</p> <p>'I think we could probably see the beginnings of that in the early to mid 90s, and definitely after 9/11, you have that going on. And I think that's the difference between secularism and Atheism is <i>condescension and contempt</i>, then to the</p>	<p>Catalyst (cont.) <i>...And the biggest thing was, it broke down all of my misconceptions about Christians. These people weren't senile. They weren't moralizing. They weren't all old. They came from every day occupations. They were schoolteachers, accountants, there were young families, a couple of retired people. So those people were from all sorts of walks and avenues of life, but they were part of this church. So that was the first thing that I noticed. The people weren't geriatrics. They were just normal people. But they were also extremely, extremely nice. And I knew nice people, that they were strangely, weirdly nice the way they treated each other, and certainly the way they treated me as well. That was significant. That kind of caught me and I was like, 'Wow, these people really are different.'</i></p> <p>Post-conversion: Joseph began 'hanging with Christians', being discipled, and getting married to a Christian girl. Joseph appreciates the Christians who played different roles in his conversion from Atheism to Christianity: <i>...Yes, that's my story. I'm always just surprised to be where I am. But very grateful for the people who had different</i></p>

	<p>next stage which is <i>the willful attempt to marginalize it</i> in all sorts of settings. The idea is, okay, if you want to be religious fine, go be religious in some little cave where we can't see you and please die off so that we don't have to deal with this problem again. <i>That's part of the cultural trajectory that I was in.</i> I came across a few Christians here and there, but I never knew them in any great personal level. <i>In both family and cultural influences, it was something for the weak and the inferior.'</i></p> <p>Catalyst: When Joseph entered into friendship(s) with Christians and Christian church community, his negative religious caricatures were dismantled and replaced with positive images and realities, opening him up towards belief: 'I was invited to go to a church service...And so I went to this church...They were just about to call a young minister from a local seminary who was a good guy. And so I got to hanging out with them.'</p>	<p>things for the journey – the Baptist pastor on that last day of school, the guy who gave me that gospel tract, the guy who invited me to church, and the people who have mentored and disciplined me ever since.'³⁵³</p> <p>Because of his own life experience, he feels purposed to break down culturally built negative caricatures of Christians: <i>'So I think the biggest need is simply to break down caricatures of what people think Christians are. And that was certainly what I had. And if that was true in the mid 90s, it is certainly true some 20 years later.'</i></p> <p><i>'In Australia, very much the radical left likes to caricature Christians as these moralizing geriatrics who just want to hurt everything from, they are against science, they are against gays, they are against everything in the world. And I think the first, the best thing you can do is to break down those caricatures. The fact is that most people just don't know any Christians. Only about 2% of the Australian population would be actively engaged in church.'</i></p>
<p>CONTEXT & COMMUNITY Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #46 Jason</p>	<p>Atheism: There was nominal exposure to religious faith among his family, friends, and community: 'There was not much. <i>It is very apathetic towards religion</i> is the best way to put it. There are people there who are have a nominal faith, but it is not part of a lifestyle, at least in the groups that I know and people I hung out with. So for my brother and myself, <i>we were raised really without any type of faith.'</i></p> <p>As an adult, an Atheist friend reinforced his Atheistic beliefs and antagonism towards Christianity: 'Well, this guy I had gone to college was exactly like me. He was very Atheistic and <i>very staunch anti-Christian type Atheist</i> and 'all the Christians were stupid and hypocrites, trying to ruin my life' and all of that kind of stuff...<i>He and I kind of fed each other. That was part of the problem is that we really fed each other.'</i></p>	<p>Catalyst (cont.) Jason's negative caricaturing of Christians and Christianity was being dismantled through direct experience with 'real Christians': <i>'Yes it was being dismantled by real experience with real Christians, and Christians that acknowledge their own difficulties and their own weaknesses and their own challenges in life and to hear that being spoken of honestly. Because the caricature was, they tell you to live a certain way and then they go and revel in living that way behind your back behind closed doors where nobody knows. It is about a control thing more than it is about a real belief thing. And so, that was kind of falling apart.'</i></p> <p>He began attending a church class and saw active Christian service and disciplines interwoven into the course along with learning, providing a 'living example' of what Christian discipleship should look like: 'So I started the class and we had a</p>

³⁵³ Joseph moved from a cultural Atheism to an active Christianity and community. Joseph's conversion was counter-cultural to his family, education, media, culture and work colleagues. His belonging to a Christian community first gave him time and experience to break down negative preconceptions of Christians and Christianity before committing to belief and conversion.

	<p>Catalyst: Jason's Atheist friend moved away, and a Christian work colleague talking with him about God and faith: 'Then when [my Atheist friend] left, it made things much easier for me to have those real conversations. And I didn't have a place to retreat back to my previous lines of defense.</p> <p>He began attending church every week, positively influenced by the people, the message, and the potential found there. 'And that shaped my view a lot. On the one hand, oh there are still a lot of questions out there but on the other hand, there are also these people that really believe this... and, <i>it is not about not being able to do the things that you want to do in life</i>, it is about <i>living a life and having joy and satisfaction and fulfillment</i>. And so it was <i>people like that that sort of softened me</i>. And then <i>through the church, getting to meet some people in that venue, and the preaching was very much the gospel being presented.</i>'</p>	<p>facilitator for the class...He was challenging... <i>he is knowledgeable and compelling and drives you to really live a faith, not just talk about a faith</i>, I just come to church on Sundays but to be a disciple. <i>...It was interweaving Christian service and disciplines into the course...And so I see that as God moving in this.'</i></p> <p>Conversion: During the Bible study class, he came to a point of belief in God and the truth of Christianity: 'I started that class and some point during that class I felt convicted that I was sure that there was a God. And I also felt to get sure that I also saw the Christian story as viable. And I went in to talk to the pastor and said I believed in God. We ended up praying...It kind of became that I was a Christian now.'³⁵⁴</p>
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12.9.3. Identity

Table 69. Identity Narrative Themes

IDENTITY	Pre-conversion Metanarrative	Catalyst Narrative CHANGING IDENTITY themes	Conversion Narrative	Post-Conversion Metanarrative
Narrative Themes	OLD IDENTITY Atheism themes		NEW IDENTITY themes	NEW IDENTITY Christian themes
	Skeptic / Atheist	Skeptic	Saved	Christian
	Intelligent	Intelligent	Christian	Reasoned
	Independent / Autonomous	Independent/ Autonomous	Chosen	Purposed
	Prideful / rebellious	Prideful	Humbled	Humbled
	Moral/immoral	Moral		Radical
	Dispirited			Freed

³⁵⁴ Jason moved from the community who criticized Christians to becoming a significant part of the community he once derided. He moved from desire for autonomy to desire for intentional communion with God and community with Christians.

	Blind			Still skeptical
IDENTITY	Pre-conversion Metanarrative	Catalyst Narrative	Conversion Narrative	Post-Conversion Metanarrative
Narrative Themes	OLD IDENTITY Atheism themes ³⁵⁵	CHANGING IDENTITY themes ³⁵⁶	NEW IDENTITY themes ³⁵⁷	NEW IDENTITY Christian themes ³⁵⁸

Table 70. Identity shift: ‘I/We Atheist(s)’ to ‘More than I/We Christians’

Identity	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative OLD IDENTITY ‘I/We’ Atheist’	Post-Conversion Metanarrative NEW IDENTITY ‘More than I/We’ Christian’
	to	

³⁵⁵ **‘Old Identity’ Atheism Narrative Themes:**

Skeptic / Atheist: (Ornery) (default) skeptic; doubter about everything; (devout) (militant) (card-carrying) (friendly) (reluctant) (anti-Christian) Atheist; (Ryan) (Matthew) (Ashley) (Michelle) (Heather) (Anthony)

Intelligent: analytical, introspective; academically focused; reader; Intellectually superior to religious believers; (Joseph) (Jennifer) (Amanda) (Nicholas) (Christopher) (Michelle) (Jessica) (Jeremy) (Heather) (Carl)

Independent/Autonomous: self-sufficient; freed from cosmic authority; independent (free) thinker; (Kyle) (Jason) (Jennifer) (Matthew) (Carl) (Jessica)

Prideful/rebellious: Prideful, rebellious, conceited, ‘more evolved’, arrogant, openly mocked religious people. ‘I was just that dumb, hard-core Atheist and had no good arguments and just had no reason. A rebel without a clue.’ ‘I was so arrogant and smug that I was right’; (Sean) (Amanda) (Paul) (Richard) (Christopher)

Moral: Strong sense of right/wrong; very moral Atheist; good work ethic; (Joseph) (Anthony) (Ashley) (SB)

Dispirited: Abused, (sin) (drug) (alcohol) (gambling) addict, liar, depressed, suicidal, stubborn, angry, reckless; ‘I became a zombie. I merely existed and would’ve continued that way if God had not intervened.’ (David) (Carl) (Melissa)

Blind: ‘I was blind’ ‘Even if the light is right in front of your face, it doesn’t mean you are seeing it.’ (Melissa) - an example of biographical reconstruction – viewing old identity/Atheism in hindsight through new identity / Christian perspective.

³⁵⁶ **‘Changing Identity’ Atheism Narrative Themes:**

Open: Open to spiritual things; hopeful agnostic, curious, open; (Jeremy) (Heather) (Christopher)

Prideful: Hard to see self as a sinner in need of forgiveness because of pride. (Christopher)

³⁵⁷ **‘New Identity’ Conversion Narrative Themes:**

Saved: ‘I was born again’; ‘I asked Jesus to come into my life’ ‘My life is not my own now. I belong to God.’ ‘Saved out of the mud when I still wallowed in it (by God)’ ‘State of being rescued, regenerated, given new hearts, renewed minds.’ (Matthew) (David) (Melissa) (Ryan)

Chosen: ‘chosen by God’; (Paul)

Humbled: Broken, in need of forgiveness; repentant; ‘I was aware that I was a (horrible) sinner’; ‘I was a sinner and in need of a Savior...He was pulling me out the ruin. my brokenness’; (Sean) (Joseph) (Paul) (Matthew) (John) (David)

³⁵⁸ **‘New Identity’ Post-Conversion Narrative Themes:**

Christian: Jesus follower, disciple, Christian, ‘I received Christian eyes’; (Joseph) (Jason) (John) (Christopher) (Ashley) (Jeremy) (Amanda)

Reasoned: A modernist man of reason and logic; ‘I am a default skeptic but not in the same way.’ (Richard) (Heather)

Purposed: Sense of God-given purpose; [We are] Christians who carry God’s glory, love, goodness, and beauty into the world; Evangelist, soul-winner; (Barbara) (Jeremy) (Sean)

Humbled: ‘I couldn’t just be smug and look down on that anymore’; (Amanda)

Radical: ‘Radical’ in modern day America as an evangelical Christian; (Paul)

Freed: Released from addiction through God’s strength; (Joseph) (Carl)

<p>IDENTITY Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #46 Jason</p>	<p>Atheism: Jason's identity was closely tied into his desire for autonomy: 'I think the number one would be this desire for self-determination, to say that <i>I am the maker of my own destiny and I am the center of my own universe</i>. I don't want anyone else to put any constraints on me. So that was part of it. Identity and community were probably the second major factor. And it just seemed like a lot more fun, you know, to be honest. It was like, <i>'Do what you want to do and don't worry about it and it is okay. No one is going to judge you. It's okay.'</i> And I think that's where the three biggest motivators.'</p> <p>His Atheism was not particularly tied to intellectual ideas but was more of a desired identity: 'I was not an analytical Atheist. I know far more now, even about the Atheist perspective and I knew then. And I have given more time towards understanding why Atheists believe what they believe, what their rationale is for a particular argument or whatever, than I ever did as an Atheist. <i>It was just an identity.</i>'³⁵⁹</p> <p>Jason's community shaped his identity: And, <i>my friends had an identity and so I wanted to be within my peer group and it is what I believed.</i> It is not that I put on this false set of beliefs that underneath I believed one thing and then tried to act a different way. It is just through this community that it solidified or helped me understand what I did believe at the time. So being with other people and experiencing their beliefs and practices or whatever it might be, it shaped my view and helped me to see what I really already believed.'</p>	<p>Catalyst: A struggle for identity began to occur when he began considering the truth of Christianity: 'Because he could see the impediment in my life and the struggle for identity that was taking place. <i>Am I going to stick with this identity or am I going to allow my identity to be shaped by God</i>, by some other thought, whatever that might be.'</p> <p>Conversion: Jason became convinced there was a God, but conversion occurred over a prolonged period of becoming convinced in the truth of Jesus and Christianity. It took a period of months before he was baptized and called himself a Christian.</p> <p>Post-Conversion: Jason strongly identified with his new role as a Christian and the life he is called to lead as a disciple of Christ: 'That whole idea that we are a city on a hill goes both way. You can't be a city on a hill and live a crappy life and expect to draw anybody to Christ. You've got to live the life that he has put within us. <i>You've got to take it seriously. And so discipleship for me is a big one for a Christian. Be a disciple first</i> and then try and win somebody, because if you aren't a disciple, you aren't convincing anyone at all.'³⁶⁰</p>
	<p>Atheism:</p>	<p>Post-conversion:</p>

³⁵⁹ Jason believed Christianity was merely an identity as well – not a truly held belief, just as he held his own Atheism, as an identity: 'It was all nonsense. And I didn't really think that most of them believed it. There may have been a handful of people that really believed it but I don't think so. I think for most of them, it was just their identity. And, that's what most of my older teenage years really were about was developing an identity.'

³⁶⁰ Jason moved from identity as fueled by community and desired autonomy (not deeply held belief) to an identity grounded through an informed, grounded belief. His primary identity shifted from an anti-Christian Atheist to become a self-proclaimed disciple of Christ. He understood his shift in identity when he was considering Christianity: 'Am I going to stick with this identity or am I going to allow my identity to be shaped by God?'. He also understood the seriousness of his change in identity: 'You've got to live the life that he has put within us. You've got to take it seriously. And so discipleship for me is a big one for a Christian. Be a disciple first...' Post-conversion, his language reflected desire for other Christians to become serious in their role as disciples/followers of Christ.

<p>IDENTITY Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>S3 #37</p> <p>Jeremy</p>	<p>Jeremy's identity is closely tied into his intellectual prowess: Jeremy's self-descriptors - very competitive; very academically minded, learned faster than most people; wanted to be the smartest guy in the room, arguing and winning arguments; captain of the debate team; editor of school newspaper; wanted to 'shred' Christians and their arguments.</p> <p>Catalyst: After spending time with a Christian philosopher and scholar, he begins to realize that he wasn't 'the smartest guy in the room' after all, that he had a lot to learn. Once he realized the depth and breadth of historical philosophical Christian thought, he was humbled: 'I am such a fool for thinking, like a punk attitude at 15 and 16 years old because I am angry, I can throw away all of this ton of literature that people have been thinking about these profoundly important questions, like who am I? I am arrogant, but I'm not that arrogant.'</p>	<p>Jeremy's language reflects not only his redemption, but also desire for others to find the same new identity, fulfilled through life in God. He shifts from esteeming himself to becoming part of a greater group for a greater good, stating: 'We as Christians have the unique privilege of doing, of carrying a little bit of God's glory and His love and His goodness and His beauty into a world that really has no fundamental understanding of those things.'</p> <p>'I think that is the true call to holiness, not so we can say, 'Look at us. We are better and have a more interesting worldview.' It is saying, 'This is what you were meant for. You deeply crave this and we want to show it to you in its most perfect form the way that we can.'³⁶¹</p>
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Table 71. Identity shift: 'Heightened Self' to 'Humbled Self'

Identity	OLD IDENTITY 'Heightened Self' to	NEW IDENTITY 'Humbled Self'
<p>IDENTITY Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #13</p> <p>Sean</p>	<p>Atheism: Sean perceived himself as prideful, smart, intimidating, argumentative and rebellious: 'I don't remember any particular event or thing, that that's it, <i>I'm an Atheist. Screw God.</i>' 'I really enjoyed arguing, debating, and going head-to-head. I knew how to make a Christian shake in his sandals.'</p> <p>He considered himself <i>'a prideful person who liked to argue and be right about everything'</i>. <i>'I took pride in making believers look and feel stupid as they could not give me logical answers to my questions or provide evidence supporting the existence of God and the validity of their faith.'</i></p>	<p>Conversion: By the time of his conversion, his pride dissolved into humility and recognition of his own state of brokenness and need: <i>'I said the sinner's prayer not really knowing everything about Jesus but knowing that I was a sinner and in need of a Savior...He was pulling me out the ruins. My brokenness.'</i></p> <p>Post-conversion: In retrospect, he describes his former Atheist self as 'a rebel without a clue': 'I was just that dumb, hard-core Atheist and had no good arguments and just had no reason. A rebel without a clue.'³⁶²</p> <p>However, he identifies himself 'now as a Christian, an evangelist and soul winner'</p>

³⁶¹ Jeremy's primary identity shifted from focus on self-elevation to becoming part of a community in Christ. His movement of identity from individualism – not only in humility – but also embracing being part of something that is bigger than himself.

³⁶² Sean was admittedly prideful, taking pleasure in making religious people feel stupid; however, he became humbled, perceiving himself as a broken, needy sinner in need of saving. He admitted his prideful sense of self as an Atheist; transformed through 'traumatic' realization and change of all of his life due to his new understanding of God.

<p>IDENTITY Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #20 Joseph</p>	<p>Atheism: Joseph perceived himself as intellectually superior to religious believers: 'I grew up thinking that religion is stupid, for the weak...that <i>Atheists are intellectually superior to believers.</i>' 'I came across a few Christians here and there, but I never knew them in any great personal level. In both family and cultural influences, it was <i>something for the weak and the inferior.</i>'</p>	<p>Conversion: He perceived himself as in need of forgiveness: 'I remember praying that Christ would be forgiving, that I would receive...' Post-conversion: He began self-identifying as a Christ-follower: '<i>I started following Jesus, hanging with Christians.</i>'³⁶³</p>
<p>IDENTITY Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #42 Ryan</p>	<p>Atheism: Ryan self-characterized as an Atheist and skeptic: '<i>I was an Atheist. I just sort of lived like that through well after I got out of the military.</i>' 'I began a road to Christianity as an <i>ornery skeptic</i>'</p>	<p>Post-conversion: Ryan's identity was transformed to someone humbled, graciously saved by God: 'God called us, regenerated us, gave us new hearts and renewed our minds. So someone who is not in that position is there because that is their natural state and we are not because God was gracious to us. We would do well to remember that. We are not in an elevated position over our Atheist neighbors. We are in a position of being rescued from being exactly where they were.' 'And some of my best friends are unfortunately not Christians. These people are still important. They are image bearers of God. Lord willing, some of them will actually be converted if that is what God wills. These people still matter. They are still important and worthy of respect and dignity.'³⁶⁴</p>
<p>IDENTITY Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F3 #36 Paul</p>	<p>Atheism: Paul characterized himself as 'arrogant' and 'very proud': 'I was very self-righteous and thought I knew everything. I was very arrogant.' 'I am 10 feet tall and bulletproof and nothing is going to hurt me, blah blah blah, you know, the macho thing.' 'I rode around on a great big horse and I definitely needed to be knocked off it.' 'I was very self-righteous and thought I knew everything.'</p>	<p>Conversion: Paul's language expressed a child-like humility and need for forgiveness; and, that he was chosen by God: 'It [the church event] was definitely geared for kids. But here I am at the age of 23, and if I had to pick a day, that was the day that I was converted. And what affected the most was this guy gives this testimony about how he was in prison and all of the terrible things that he had been, but Jesus still forgave him. And I said to myself, if that guy can be forgiven, maybe I can too. I responded to the altar call, and there in a sea of three-footers, I</p>

³⁶³ Joseph was arrogant as an Atheist with a strong sense of intellectual superiority to religious believers - now using his intellect to further Christianity as a theologian and apologist. His belief that religion was for the 'stupid and weak' was transformed into one who studied and became an advocate for the intellectual foundation for the Christian worldview. A strong shift is observed in positive self-perception as an Atheist and negative perception of Christians towards an increasing positive view of Christians and Christianity when cultural stereotypes were broken down. It was only through meeting a friend who embodied the ethic and nature of authentic Christianity that he became open to the idea of Christianity as 'good' and worthy of consideration. His arrogance was diffused and changed to recognition of humble need for forgiveness and became a follower of Christ. 'I'm better than you' to 'I'm one of you' now.

³⁶⁴ Ryan moved from being an 'ornery skeptic' to one who sees all people as important, worthy of respect and dignity.

	He viewed Christians as weak: ‘I viewed Christians is being very weak and very needy, very desperate because they couldn’t deal with the harsh realities apart from some benevolent grandfather in the sky.’	am almost 6 feet tall and I am surrounded by a bunch of third graders receiving Christ’ ‘That day, I was just tired of keeping up the façade.’ ³⁶⁵
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12.9.4. Experience

Table 72. Life Experience Narrative Themes

EXPERIENCE Narrative Themes	Pre-conversion Metanarrative OLD EXPERIENCE Atheism themes	Catalyst Narrative CHANGING EXPERIENCE themes	Conversion Narrative NEW EXPERIENCE Christian themes	Post-Conversion Metanarrative NEW EXPERIENCE Christian themes
Life Experience	Busy life	Catalyst event or experience	Church attendance (Barbara)	
	Negative life experience	Searching for answers	‘Immediate’ positive experiential effects of conversion	Relationships and life decisions, behaviors improved
	Positive life experience	Relationship change		
		Existential experience of beauty		
Life Experience	Pre-conversion Metanarrative OLD EXPERIENCE Atheism themes ³⁶⁶	Catalyst Narrative CHANGING EXPERIENCE themes ³⁶⁷	Conversion Narrative NEW EXPERIENCE	Post-Conversion Metanarrative NEW EXPERIENCE

³⁶⁵ Paul’s language reflects change of self-perceived favorability (‘I was very self-righteous and thought I knew everything. I was very arrogant.’) to a more humbled self-perspective in the catalyst, conversion and post-Conversion Stages. As an Atheist belief in God was for those who were ‘weak’. He moved from his ‘high-horse of pride’ to becoming humbled through the conversion process and at an event ‘in a sea of third grade children’. He also believes his conversion is not his own accomplishment, but the work of God. Paul’s language reflected change of self-perceived favorability (‘arrogant’ ‘very proud’ ‘macho’ ‘bulletproof’) to humility (‘tired of keeping up the façade’).

³⁶⁶ **‘Old Experience’ Atheism Narrative Themes:**

Busy life: general drifting away from belief; (Barbara)

Negative life experience: Difficult family life, friend’s death; alcoholic, divorced parents; difficult relationship with father, rough lifestyle, poor choices; sudden repeated visual loss; ‘I just saw a lot of pain that people went through’; abused, suicidal, drug addicted, self-harm; addictions; (Sean) (Jennifer) (John) (Paul) (Matthew) (David) (Carl)

Positive life experience: Parents religious or Atheist, open and transparent, allowing wide reading, thinking; (Nicholas) (Ashley)

³⁶⁷ **‘Changing Experience’ Catalyst Narrative Themes:**

Moving to new context: community, work, home, education environment – more Christians; (Barbara) (Sean) (Paul) (Richard)

Searching for answers: Depression, searching; prayed to God; (Paul) (David)

Relationship change: Girlfriend became a Christian; (John)

Existential experience of beauty: Became troubled by felt self-evident authentic beauty (sunset, Mozart), ‘something bigger going on here’;(Jeremy)

			Christian themes ³⁶⁸	Christian themes ³⁶⁹
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Table 73. Experience shift: ‘Unfavorable Life Experience’ to ‘Favorable Life Experience’

Experience	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative OLD EXPERIENCE Unfavorable Life Experience Atheist’ to	Post-Conversion Metanarrative NEW EXPERIENCE Favorable Life Experience Christian’
LIFE EXPERIENCE Biographical Reconstruction F5 #01 David	<p>Atheism: David’s childhood was difficult with ‘a very different outlook on life from the beginning’: ‘My relationship with my dad, actually all of our relationships with dad wasn’t exactly strong. <i>Dad was an alcoholic as long as I can remember. He was a workaholic too. He would get up at four o’clock to go to work and start with a six pack and drink beer all day long until he got home and then he would drink scotch and tell he passed out. And that is pretty much most of what I remember of him. It is what it is...I was abused when I was five. Being saved as long as I have, I have no guilt or shame about it, but from that point on I was also suicidal. I tried to kill myself when I was five. I told my mom I wanted to die when I was five...you have sort of a blackness in you. Unless someone experiences it, you can’t understand it.’</i></p> <p>His parents’ divorce also contributed to his heavy drug use, self-harm, and personal instability during his teenage years: ‘When I was 14 my parents divorced, my mom kicking my dad out of the house. I wouldn’t even talk to mom for two weeks. I was furious because I was just getting to that point where I wanted to get to know dad and then mom kicks him out.’</p>	<p>Atheism (cont.) ‘I didn’t just start dabbling into drugs. There was about four years <i>when there wasn’t a day when I wasn’t chemically altered</i> in one way or another. I didn’t play around with it. I had gotten to the point of, if you put it on the table I’m going to take it. I didn’t care what it was or what it does to me. That also affected my stability a little bit more. <i>I got into carving on myself with knives.</i> I didn’t need to do drugs. I was already unstable. By the end of it, I was at the point that I knew <i>drugs were my idol</i> and I would say, ‘This is my god. This is the god that I will worship.’³⁷⁰</p> <p>Post-Conversion: David reports significant positive change in his life experience: ‘<i>It has been a complete reversal. It was such a drastic change in my life that not long after I got delivered from drugs and I got delivered from suicide and depression.</i>’</p> <p>He describes his conversion as changing everything in his life: ‘<i>To me, it is a 180 change, but it is an across the board change. It is not just internally, it is externally and relationally and vocationally, just everything. I know where I would be without God because I was working a dead-end job and I would be dead. So, it’s definitely all credit to God.</i>’</p>
	Atheism:	Catalyst:

³⁶⁸ ‘New Experience’ Conversion Narrative Themes:

‘Immediate’ positive experiential effects of conversion: ‘My language was atrocious, and I immediately stopped swearing’; ‘I immediately threw away my drug paraphernalia’; immediately freed from alcohol and gambling addictions; (Richard) (Matthew) (Carl)

³⁶⁹ ‘New Experience’ Post-Conversion Narrative Themes:

Relationships and life decisions, behaviors improved: Reconciled with father, left unethical job, ‘the fruit and effects were obvious’; It has been a complete reversal. It was such a drastic change in my life that not long after I got delivered from drugs, suicide and depression’; quit smoking, let go of other addictions, restored marriage and relationship with children; (John) (David) (Melissa)

³⁷⁰ Drug use controlled his life for many years. This is an interesting way of expressing his addiction – ‘drugs as an idol’. Perhaps this is biographical reconstruction, using biblical term (idol) and applying it to his former addiction.

LIFE EXPERIENCE Biographical Reconstruction F5 #43 Carl	<p>Carl's life centered around gambling and drinking:</p> <p><i>'And so, when I got out of the service I went to Auburn and I took a degree in accounting. I started in 1963, finished in 1966 and then took a job in public accounting here in Montgomery where I finished out my career. I took early retirement in 1996. I got married and 1965 but I had done real well in public accounting in my opinion and become a partner. But in the early 1980s I developed a tremendous drinking problem. I was drinking every day. In the 1980s I also got involved with gambling, casino gambling, and just local gambling for high-stakes poker games such as that. I am an alcoholic and I am a compulsive gambler.'</i></p>	<p>He began to realize the consequences of his life choices:</p> <p><i>'On this particular day February 1, 1999, which was a Monday right after the Super Bowl that year and I had been on a junket over to Philadelphia, Mississippi at one of the Indian casinos over there and I had lost a lot of money. I had been losing a lot of money and I had been hiding it from Faye, my wife, as best I could. She knew I drank too much but I don't know that she knew the extent of my drinking and my gambling.'</i></p> <p>Conversion:</p> <p>Carl 'surrendered his life to God'</p> <p>Post-conversion:</p> <p>Carl immediately found the strength through God to resist temptation for drinking and gambling since that day: <i>'Well, to this day, God has sent me straight home, so to speak, and I have not had a drink or placed a bet since February 1, 1999. It is not in my strength. It is obviously in His strength.'</i>³⁷¹</p>
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Table 74. 'Experience with Christians' Narrative Themes

Experience with or as Christians	Pre-Metanarrative OLD EXPERIENCE Atheism themes	Catalyst Narrative CHANGING EXPERIENCE themes	Conversion Narrative NEW EXPERIENCE themes	Post-Metanarrative NEW EXPERIENCE Christian themes
	Positive experience with religious people	Positive experience with religious people		
	Limited experience with Christians	Negative caricatures were dismantled by encountering, befriending Christians	Negative caricatures of Christians were dismantled by attending church	Embodies authentic Christian life in order to counter negative cultural stereotypes
	Negative experience with religious people	Challenged by genuine and/or intelligent Christian(s)		Emulates modeled, genuine faith
	Negative Religious Life experience			
Experience with or as Christians	Pre-Metanarrative OLD EXPERIENCE Atheism	Catalyst Narrative CHANGING EXPERIENCE	Conversion Narrative NEW EXPERIENCE	Post-Metanarrative NEW EXPERIENCE Christian

³⁷¹ Carl experienced an immediate change in resolution of his addictive behaviors post-conversion. Considering the nature of his compulsive behaviors, this is quite a remarkable and sudden change. One wonders how most would explain this immediate, dramatic shift – most likely based upon one's meta-narrative.

	themes ³⁷²	themes ³⁷³	themes ³⁷⁴	themes ³⁷⁵
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³⁷² **‘Old’ Experience Sense-making Atheism Narrative Themes:**

Limited experience with Christians: (Barbara) (Joseph) (Nicholas)

Negative experience with religious people: Anti-Intellectual, Hypocritical, Judgmental, Too Evangelistic, Uncaring: ‘made me uncomfortable’, ‘moralizing’; ‘fire and brimstone holy roller’, church alienation of divorced mother, religious people were ‘idiot sheep’, hypocrites; ‘quirky’; ‘very anti-intellectual’, ‘always judgmental, looking for something to criticize’; ‘aggressively’ ‘forcibly’ evangelistic, argumentative, defensive; intolerant, uncaring; terrible hypocrites, did not have good answers to my questions; ‘really obnoxious’ ‘in-your-face’ evangelists; unkind, hateful, angry, ‘a huge turnoff’; (Sean) (Jason) (Jennifer) (Amanda) (Richard) (Christopher) (Ashley) (Michelle) (Jessica) (Jeremy)

Negative Religious Life experience: Legalistic religious home, unkind, unloving, estranged from parents at 17;(Jessica)

Positive experience with religious people: ‘nice people, tight families, always welcome at their house, attractive to me’; (Sean)

³⁷³ **‘Changing’ Experience Sense-making Catalyst Narrative Themes:**

Positive experience with religious people: Met/Befriended Christians who changed negative misconceptions to positive: ‘normal’, ‘nice’ ‘different’; ‘thinking Christians’, respectful, treated me with dignity, hospitable, non-judgmental love; young, smart, attractive couple with feeling of innocence, ‘radical embrace of warmth and interest in people, with genuine compassion’ ‘a real love, a real kindness; ‘really nice, lovely Christian girl softened me unbelievably’; serious Christian, respectful, patient, intelligent, strong character, happy, authentically joyful, profoundly appealing people; highly educated, intellectual; kindness; and,

Negative caricatures were dismantled by encountering, befriending Christians: ‘real experience with real Christians’ who were ‘living their faith’; ‘lived out the gospel’; principled lives, took their faith seriously’, ‘there was clearly a warmth amongst the family and a deep trust and joy. It was a happy home’; ‘raw, authentic person who wasn’t defensive when they knew I didn’t believe in God’, honest and real with her own struggles, caring; (Joseph) (Jason) (Ryan) (Anthony) (Jennifer) (John) (Richard) (Michelle) (Jessica) (Jeremy) (Heather)

Challenged by Christian(s)³⁷³ to ‘study what he is criticizing’, to ‘accept or reject Jesus Christ’; to read the bible; (Sean) (Joseph) (Kyle) (Paul)

³⁷⁴ **‘New’ Experience Sense-making Conversion Narrative Themes:**

Negative caricatures of Christians were dismantled by attending church: (see Context and Community)

³⁷⁵ **‘New’ Experience Sense-making Post-Conversion Narrative Themes:**

Embodies authentic Christian life in order to counter negative cultural stereotypes: Lives consistent with beliefs, live demonstrating power and joy especially in difficult circumstances, present yourself as a rational person, genuinely care about people; open our home and hearts to people; ‘just be genuine, patient, gracious, not hypocritical’ Break down caricatures of what people think Christians are’; (Joseph) (Amanda) (John) (Matthew)

Emulates genuine faith as had been modelled:³⁷⁵ He encountered ‘willingness to see a lost person as that – as lost and not as a kind of moral piranha. Just point them in the direction of their shepherd. That’s a wonderful model, very welcoming.’ (John)

**Table 75. Experience shift:
‘Unfavorable Experience with Christians’ to ‘Favorable Experience with Christians’**

	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative ‘Unfavorable Experience With Christians’	Catalyst/Conversion Narrative Favorable Experience With Christians’
CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE Biographical Reconstruction F2 #45 Jennifer	<p>Atheism: High school experience with Christians was not positive: ‘I only really knew a handful of people in high school that declared themselves to be Christians, and they seemed <i>quirky</i> to me and <i>hypocritical</i>.’</p> <p>Catalyst: At university, experience with Christians was positive: ‘I think it was a combination of both head and heart. Yes, thinking Christians who were able to some degree were able to answer my questions, but I don’t think every question is answerable, but who were also <i>respectful, who treated me with dignity, who asked me questions</i>.’</p> <p>‘And so, I was impressed by, as I began to meet more Christians, not only their intellectual rigor because some Christians are not academics - some of the Christians I was meeting were wives or husbands of people who were studying there and they were doing something else or whatever.’</p>	<p>Catalyst (cont.): ‘I also saw how he acted and treated people. <i>I also saw other Christians I was beginning to know how they acted and treated people</i>. In many ways they were <i>living out the gospel</i>. I just didn’t know what that was yet...And it wasn’t like they were these cheesy people either or unbelievably good or whatever. They were funny and down to earth and made mistakes or whatever too, but I saw this difference.’</p> <p>‘One thing that spoke to me was <i>hospitality</i> for instance. Christians who would have me for dinner or have me to their home or open their place for me to be restored. And, okay, you could say non-Christians do that too. Of course, they do as well. But there was <i>this gentleness and servitude and this intuitiveness</i>; and there were also <i>many ways in which they engaged me</i>. [She recalls a particular example.]. It was just so foreign to me, that kind of <i>radical, ironically non-judgmental love</i>.’³⁷⁶</p>
CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE Biographical Reconstruction F2 #50 Amanda	<p>Atheism: Amanda was put off from religious people and religion due to a combination of anti-intellectualism and judgmentalism: ‘I really didn’t see it as harmful except when the fundamentalists, those <i>I thought were very anti-intellectual</i>. I thought of them as, like my dad’s brother was a born-again Christian. But in his youth, he wasn’t very winsome about it and he would call his parents and tell them they were going to hell. All of his siblings got ticked off because my grandparents are the sweetest people ever and I don’t think that’s the way to approach them...That’s what Christians are like and <i>it definitely fed into my aversion</i>... And they were always <i>judgmental</i>. My uncle would come, and it</p>	<p>Post-Conversion: Amanda is conscious of her authenticity in living out her Christian life in front of and with others in order to counter negative cultural stereotypes of Christians: ‘I think that when they start talking to a Christian, like somebody, looking at Christian’s lives, so the way I see it is this, there is a lot of damage done in the way people perceive Christianity in the world today. People often point out hypocrisy and this and that. <i>I think that if they see you living in a certain way that is consistent with your beliefs and if you express somehow your beliefs, not just that I’m another decent person but they actually do</i></p>

³⁷⁶ Important factors changing Jennifer’s negative stereotype of Christians included both their intellectual rigor as well as their embodied ‘living out’ of the Christian gospel through their attitudes, words, actions, and love. This is an example of both functional and substantive influences working together towards producing a catalyst of changed perspective.

	<p>would always be like he was <i>looking around for something to criticize.</i>'</p> <p>Catalyst: In college, Amanda was on the debate team with a Muslim and a Christian who were surprisingly intellectual: <i>'I was completely stunned. I mean, I really did not think they existed. I totally did not believe that there was anybody like that. I didn't believe that intelligent people believed in traditional, orthodox Christianity. And, so, to me it was really a big surprise. Again, going back to how I had formed my views, just this impression that no intelligent person really believes this stuff.</i></p> <p><i>I mean they might go to church just because their family does, it's like a tradition and it's pleasant in that sense, but there's no reason. And so that surprised me. I didn't even know of apologetics of anything like that. So, it was a big surprise. That in itself was big. Just that. You know what I mean? Not even proving, because I had this huge kind of smugness about my beliefs and I was like, 'wait a second. Now I can't be like that.'</i>"³⁷⁷</p>	<p><i>know that I'm a Christian, then that can make an impact.'</i>³⁷⁸</p> <p><i>'So, the world sees Christians as these weaklings, these hypocrites. So, if you can live in a way that demonstrates power and joy, that's huge, especially in difficult circumstances, that kind of thing.</i></p> <p><i>And like I said, presenting yourself as a rational person and not resorting to fideism. I'm not trying to say that I'm a model of everybody, but I might be representative of a certain group, people who grew up in the faith and thought it wasn't reasonable and then left. So, that's definitely one way.</i></p> <p><i>And then genuinely caring about people...And, to actually feel that you have been invested in as a friend, as a long-term person that this is a relationship that I actually, genuinely treasure you as a person.'</i></p>
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Table 76. Experience shift:
'Favorable Experience with Christians' to 'More Favorable Experience with Christians'

	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative 'Favorable Experience With Christians'	Post-Conversion Metanarrative More Favorable Experience With Christians'
CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE Biographical Reconstruction F2 #44 Anthony	<p>Atheism: Anthony had a culturally-informed condescension towards Christianity: <i>'I think sometimes there is such a culture confidence in Atheism. There is such a culture of, 'this is obviously correct' that it leads to a quite uncharitable interpretation of things that come across your path. Like, if you encounter an argument for God, you just presume it is going to be nonsense,</i></p>	<p>Catalyst (cont.) <i>But yeah, these people certainly took it seriously. It was an attractive way to live. There was clearly a warmth amongst the family and a deep trust and joy. It was a happy place, a happy home.'</i> <i>'They were articulating, exemplifying, demonstrating, living out a life that seemed qualitatively richer in some way. So yeah, it forced me to pay attention.'</i></p>

³⁷⁷ Amanda had developed a strongly negative stereotype of Christians due to her prior experience with fundamentalists. However, her perceptions were dismantled once she met some articulate, intelligent Christians. Her language here is quite striking. She did not believe any intelligent person could believe in traditional, orthodox Christianity. She was 'stunned' and 'surprised'.

³⁷⁸ Because Amanda did not experience what she considers an authentic brand of Christianity in her youth, she now seeks to live out an authentic embodiment of Christianity for others to experience (joyful through difficulties, rational/intelligent, and genuinely loving).

	<p>like, ‘These <i>stupid theists</i>, God bless them, trying to use logic.”</p> <p>Catalyst: Anthony began attending a church youth group with a friend and became acquainted with a Christian family and attracted to their lives. He decided to take another look at Christianity in spite of his skepticism: ‘I started to hang out with her, to speak to her and to speak to the whole family at bit more outside of youth group than I normally would have done...their lives were certainly impressive. <i>They are some solid Christians...people who live it out as it were which was good because I had always thought previously that Christians didn’t really believe what they claimed to believe.</i> It seems to me that the implications of Christianity of being true would require a certain kind of life.</p>	<p>Post-Conversion: As a Christian, Anthony now believes that Christians should live authentic Christian lives, just as had been demonstrated to him: ‘They [non-Christians] <i>need to encounter Christians who, by the way they life, show what it would look like to actually live a religious life...</i>the ability to imaginatively conceive of yourself living a Christian life plays an important epistemic role in helping you feel your way into that life - a role that has epistemic merits typically not well grasped by these sorts of thinkers. But it will do its work anyway!’³⁷⁹</p>
<p>CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F3 #36 John</p>	<p>Atheism: John’s girlfriend became a Christian and asked him to consider Christianity, but he became angry: ‘So, we had been together for about three years when this day <i>she walks in and says, ‘What do you think about Jesus?’ And, I had never thought a thing about Jesus. Why would I think about Jesus?</i> So, 2-3 days later we split up and then that’s when <i>I just became angry.</i> Then she called me after about 2-3 weeks and the Christians wanted to meet me so <i>I was kind of going along to beat them up or something. I was pretty ticked off. Who were these people bursting into her life and messing with mine?’</i></p> <p>Catalyst: John met with his girlfriend’s Christian friends and was disarmed by their genuine warmth, love, and kindness: ‘So, I met Christians for the first time and really for hours they shared. I mean, I came in, I was smart mouthing at first that God was a bit of a non-entity in my mind. The</p>	<p>Post-Conversion: John describes his experience with a hospitable couple as a model for himself as a Christian in engaging others: ‘<i>The greatest lesson from people like them was to open their home and their hearts to be available to nonbelievers.</i> So, there was no us and them. I mean there was in the sense that they were believers and you were not – that was clear – <i>but there was a radical embrace of warmth and interest in the person with genuine compassion.</i> So, their start was from a place that we are interested in you and we believe God is interested in you and we want to talk to you. And, we are willing to take your silliness, your swearing, and they were not put off by anything that I had to offer.</p> <p>So, I think were a <i>great model for me of Christian hospitality</i> as being a primary way and a willingness to go through the process with people, however long it took. <i>I was there for hours in their house. There was no sense of rush. There wasn’t an appointment, nor was there any sense that I had to conform to a particular thing</i></p>

³⁷⁹ Anthony appreciated and was experientially attracted to Christians and Christianity even as an Atheist. It was the intellectual component preventing him from belief. This was reflected in his willingness to be a part of the Christian community and date a Christian girl as an Atheist, continuing throughout his shift from Atheism to Christianity. Because an embodied example of authentic, attractive Christian living was impactful for him, he sees and advocates the power of living out of a Christian life before others.

	<p>wife, she was obviously an evangelist and they were smart....And, they were a young, modern couple – attractive, trendy. But, this feeling of innocence, something like that.</p> <p>Conversion: During the prolonged conversation with the Christian couple, his ‘walls fell’ and he was able to ‘listen more and receive’ what they were saying:</p> <p>‘That was where I went from being absolutely sure that there wasn’t a God to there might be, and <i>as time went as I listened more, I began to hear more and receive. So, I think the walls fell in that sense...So, they were very helpful in that and very willing to go through that process, so that really led to [conversion], yeah.</i>’</p>	<p><i>before they would be happy. I mean they obviously wanted me to believe in God, they gave me reasons to do so, but it was their perseverance and tenacity. But all definitely surrounded by a real love, a real kindness. And so, I think for me, they were being themselves. They really were being themselves and had become comfortable in their faith, in their desire to share it, and in their willingness to see a lost person as that – as lost and not as a kind of a moral piranha. Just point them in the direction of their shepherd. That’s a wonderful model, very welcoming.</i></p> <p>‘I think there was a real, just because <i>no one had really talked to me. Which is why I very much got involved in evangelism and sharing afterwards because, you know, some people have just never heard, never had a chance to talk. So, if you go through the process with them and hear their own doubts and help them, they may be in a position where they would listen.</i>’³⁸⁰</p>
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12.9.5. Emotional Sense-Making

Table 77. Emotional Sense-Making Narrative Themes

EMOTIONAL SENSE- MAKING	Pre-conversion Metanarrative	Catalyst Narrative	Conversion Narrative	Post-Conversion Metanarrative
Narrative Themes	OLD EMOTIONAL SENSE-MAKING Atheism themes	CHANGING EMOTIONAL SENSE-MAKING themes	NEW EMOTIONAL SENSE-MAKING themes	NEW EMOTIONAL SENSE-MAKING Christian themes
	Family contempt		Worry and fear of family rejection, choosing wrongly	Emotional joy and peace in conversion despite losing friendships
	Painful events, experiences, unanswered prayer	Depression from painful event	Releasing anger, open to God	Change from negative to positive emotion
	Emotional contempt towards Christians	Emotional sense-making of Christians & Christianity; emotional contempt lessens		A holistic understanding of Christianity integrates and explains emotions

³⁸⁰ Because John was unexpectedly treated with kindness, respect and hospitality – it was disarming and attractive to him. A Christian couple gave him space to talk and to listen and consider issues which had before that time not been intentionally thought through. This model now informs the way he approaches conversations with others – with patience, love, kindness, respect.

	Resists moral or personal imposition from divine authority	Regret over poor life choices		
	Emotional Energy of Atheism	Mixed emotions in considering Christianity		Anger turned towards Atheistic worldview bias
	Sense of alienation and fear as an Atheist	Feeling accepted and heard by 'genuine', honest Christians		
	Depression, fear, loss of happiness with loss of faith in becoming an Atheist	Emotional connection to Christian writings, beauty		
	Pre-conversion Metanarrative OLD EMOTIONAL SENSE-MAKING Atheism themes³⁸¹	Catalyst Narrative CHANGING EMOTIONAL SENSE-MAKING themes³⁸²	Conversion Narrative NEW EMOTIONAL SENSE-MAKING	Post-Conversion Metanarrative NEW EMOTIONAL SENSE-MAKING

³⁸¹ **'Old Emotional Sense-making' Atheism Narrative Themes:**

Family contempt: Mother 'kicked out' of the church as a pregnant teenager; father modelled anger towards religious people; alcoholic mother's contempt for religion; my mother was bitter about God; I picked it up from my dad; (Sean) (Joseph) (Jennifer) (David)

Painful events, experiences, unanswered prayer: Friend's death; difficult, absent father, alcoholic mother; father's death; parental divorce, sexual abuse, depression, 'a blackness in him'; difficult living circumstances; (Sean) (Jennifer) (Paul) (David) (Jessica)

Emotional Contempt towards Christians: 'I didn't have a problem emotionally damaging people'; 'I knew Christians. who would speak, and I would say, 'Oh, that's stupid. Next topic.' I wasn't going to have the conversation. It bored me.'; 'I mocked and ridiculed him, the Christian but was much more respectful to the Muslim.' 'Well, for me, the only emotion I thought was disgust [towards Christians], 'I was contentious from the beginning'; 'The worst person that you can share the gospel with, I was him.'; 'hostile towards religious people for believing nonsense'; 'I became hostile towards Christians; where I knew people 'if they identified themselves as religious, I immediately wrote them off.'; 'openly hostile to religious claims'; (Jason) (Ryan) (Amanda) (John) (Paul) (Matthew) (David) (Michelle) (Jessica) (Jeremy)

Moral imposition: 'I was Anti-Christian – against people who were trying to impose how I should live my life'; 'if Christians were anything, they were finger pointing, angry people who are moralistic.'; 'I hated Christianity with an almost religious fervor. I abhorred (real and perceived) hypocrisy and judgmentalism in Christians. I found Christian moral constraints both untrue and subjectively repulsive'; '[Moral strictness] just made me dig in my heels and say that I am never going to be a Christian' (Jason) (John) (Christopher) (Jessica)

Emotional Energy of Atheism: 'It took a lot of emotional energy to sustain it' (Kyle)

Sense of alienation and fear as an Atheist: 'There was a galvanizing point for me when all of a sudden it was me versus all of the Christians who want to oppress me... I do remember at that point to be afraid of this whole religion business. It's not an easy thing to be an Atheist I guess. That's when I really started, like, I'm an Atheist and this is how the world should be. You shouldn't force your religion on to me. That was probably the turning point.' (Ashley)

³⁸² **'Changing' Emotional Sense-making Catalyst Narrative Themes:**

Depression from painful event: Sudden visual impairment caused severe depression; (Paul)

Emotional Sense-making of Christians & Christianity - Emotional Contempt Lessons: Christians were patient, listened to me.; I realized conversion is not about winning an argument, [my friend] is doing it out of love, even though I could tell it was making her really uncomfortable. ...That shaped my emotional reaction to Christianity....I also found out that at its root, Christianity is about love. From my experience, from someone who has fallen short of my own human standards, and needing sanctification, it captured that part of me. I see there is this need that I have that fits what Christianity teaches. But

			themes ³⁸³	Christian themes ³⁸⁴
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Table 78. Emotional Sense-Making shift: ‘Anger/Contempt’ to ‘Emotional Resolution’

Emotional Sense-Making BR Shift	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative	Post-Conversion Metanarrative
	‘Anger/Contempt’ to	‘Emotional Resolution’
EMOTIONAL SENSE-MAKING Biographical Reconstruction S3 #37 Jeremy	Atheism: As an Atheist, Jeremy negatively viewed religious claims and religious people. He describes himself as ‘openly hostile to religious claims’, ‘incredibly angry about something I fundamentally didn’t understand’. Although he ‘didn’t despise’ Christians (e.g., street preachers), he came	Catalyst (cont.) When beginning to read the Bible, particularly a biography of Jesus, Jeremy was unexpectedly emotionally drawn to him: ‘At that point I had read the Gospel of John and I realized how much I liked the guy. I didn’t know what I was expecting. My experience was not with very

then, feeling that it was right... there was a long time where I was saying, I don’t believe it is true. But, my heart was in it though. It is really beautiful, I will give it that.’ (John) (Ashley)

Regret over poor life choices: ‘I was having a pity party going over all that was wrong in my life - all of the drinking and I was doing, all of the money that I owed, the horrible example that I was setting for my two teenage boys. And I came to the realization that I had nobody to blame for that but myself.’ (Carl)

Mixed emotions in considering Christianity: felt both anger & irritation; Christianity offered things both emotionally appealing (purpose/meaning/value) yet emotionally distasteful (see self as a sinner in need of forgiveness). It was a ‘tough adaptation’ to see self in a new, more sobered way; (Jennifer) (Christopher)

Feeling accepted and heard by ‘genuine’, honest Christians: ‘I came to [church small group] and she said, ‘Okay, do you want to talk about it?’ And we stayed and talked for about two hours. I just told her all this stuff. I told her, ‘You are the first Christian I have ever liked. And I am not even sure that I like you. But I don’t dislike you.’’ (Jessica)

Emotional connection to Christian writings: ‘My college years was the time when I got one of the most important seeds that was planted. And that was that I encountered **Christian poetry** for the very first time. I was tremendously moved by it. It just knocked me out. I loved it...And that was how I really first heard the gospel because **Tolkien’s essay** on Fairy Stories...It is the most important thing that I have probably ever read. And I remember vividly reading this essay, reading that passage of the essay, that it gave me chills, that I felt something...It’s tremendous. And there was something there that resonated with me.’ (Michelle)

³⁸³ ‘New Emotional Sense-making Conversion Narrative Themes:

Worry and fear of family rejection, choosing wrongly: ‘What happens if I believe and they don’t believe? ... ‘God is giving me a choice.’ I was afraid I was going to pick the wrong thing. I was really not sure how it was going to go.’ (Heather).

Releasing anger, open to God: ‘When I prayed it was kind of like this, ‘Okay God, I’m not sure if you are listening. I am kind of able to accept that maybe, perhaps You are real... I don’t think I hate you anymore.’ (Jessica)

³⁸⁴ ‘New Emotional Sense-making Post-Conversion Narrative Themes:

Emotional joy and peace in conversion despite losing friendships: ‘It was difficult, and I think also though, there’s kind of a new conversion joy that helped to get us through it. I had a pretty strong sense of peace about it considering how crappy it was losing a bunch of friends.’ (Christopher)

Change from negative to positive emotion: ‘That depression and suicide, that blackness that is so encompassing in anything you do was gone immediately...It is nothing but joy now. Nothing but joy and peace. The peace that I have now compared to the darkness that used to consume me, that is irreplaceable. There is nothing that can replace that.’ (David)

A holistic understanding of Christianity integrates and explains emotions: ‘In Christianity you can move back and forth very comfortably between the existential and the rational because it is a seamless worldview and it actually explains my emotions, my aesthetics, and all of that tie in nicely with my reason.’; ‘...recognition of the wholeness of the faith, a fullness that is much more than I realized...Here is the universe opening up in front of me. Okay! And my body completely integrated into what my faith teaches. And my emotions completely integrated and my relationships and everything included, nothing left out.’ (John) (Michelle)

Anger turned towards Atheistic worldview bias: ‘It eventually rotated around and became irritation at this culture that didn’t give me a chance to make my own informed decision.’; ‘I remember being so angry about how come it took so long for me to read this or for somebody to actually clarify what this is...this story is incredible.’³⁸⁴; (Jennifer) (Jeremy)

	<p>to eventually ‘really despise the way they treated me and my friends’. ‘It was a big power trip. I despised that idea of that really intense ultraconservative Christianity. It just set me off.’</p> <p>As an existential Atheist, he struggled emotionally with his worldview’s impotence to ground things he highly valued. His emotional dissonance caused depression and self-harm: ‘And I could not find justification for things like beauty or morality and that really spun me out. And it wasn’t, and I think that the thing what really started messing with me was when those ideas left the academic playground and actually started to impact my day to day. And I was really quickly, between the age of 14-16, <i>I was diagnosed with clinical depression... ‘There is no such thing as a happy, consistent nihilist.’ And that was very much my life...it also steals all of your hope and all of your joy...I really spiraled out of control and got into self-harm. My friends and I were into the heavy metal scene and we were cutters. So that kind of stuff, we got so tripped out on philosophy that it really turned our worlds upside down.</i>’</p> <p>Catalyst: His anger at religion became replaced with passion towards knowledge of what was true: ‘It really shifted from an interesting philosophical exercise to this is the kind of stuff that kept me awake at night because I wanted to know, I want to know. Is God really there? I want to know. And, that really takes it to a whole another level of passion, I guess.’</p>	<p>intellectually interesting people, a lot of bigots, really, so when I saw Jesus throwing down with the Pharisees I thought I love this guy. And so it was a really weird sensation. <i>I was magnetized towards him</i> as a person so even if he wasn’t the Son of God, this guy knew his stuff and it made me feel like, here I am and I thought I was so advanced in my thinking.’</p> <p>Conversion: Emotional resistance remained even as he was becoming a Christian: ‘I always say, ‘I became a Christian kicking and screaming.’</p> <p>However, during his spiritual experience, he experienced a ‘sense of peace’ as well as a sense of emotional relief, ‘the emotional baggage lifted’ as ‘a breath to the soul’.</p> <p>Post-Conversion: Jeremy continued to express anger – not at religion or religious people, but rather because no one had adequately explained to him the incredible nature of what or who he had been rejecting as an Atheist: ‘And I was just reading scripture and <i>I remember being so angry about, how come it took so long</i> for me to read this or for somebody to actually clarify what this is. I just couldn’t believe it. You often hear that the God of Christianity is so small. And it is like, I don’t know what scripture you are reading because this story is incredible.’</p>
<p>EMOTIONAL SENSE-MAKING Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F5 #01 David</p>	<p>Atheism: As a teenager, David expressed strong anger at God because of life difficulties and disappointments:</p> <p>By 12, I stopped going to church. Generally, by the age of, <i>because my parents got divorced when I was 14 and that really got me being mad at God.</i> By the time I was 15 <i>I told God that I wanted him out of my life and I told Satan, I wanted him in my life.</i> I was <i>that pissed off about it all</i> and then in high school I got into dabbling in the occult. In college, I got into drugs. And by then, I just stopped</p>	<p>Catalyst (cont.): Desperate to deal with his depression, he ‘turned to religion’: ‘None of this can help me so I need to help myself. So, I go buy this book...there was one line in the appendix that said 90% of depressives turn to religion for help. So, I called my mom and asked her if she had a Bible because I wanted to read it. Like I said, I believe in God, but I don’t like Christians. Give me a Bible I want to read it.’</p> <p>Post-conversion:</p>

	<p>believing that God was real or that he existed.</p> <p>Due to painful experiences (e.g., parental divorce, sexual abuse from babysitter, two years of transient deafness), he states he was suicidal from the time of the abuse (age 5), resulting in eventual drug use, self-harm, depression, suicide attempts, personal instability and venturing into dark, occult practices. He reported a 'blackness' in him. At one point he was kicked out of his mother's home for his personal recklessness and constant drug use.</p> <p>Catalyst: Even though he had come to believe in God after a providential circumstance, he continued in a drug lifestyle, and held great disdain for Christians: 'It was probably about two or three years later, I was still high all the time, stoned all of the time. I ended up in Tulsa. And by this time, <i>I believe in God. God is cool, I believe in you. Jesus, piss off.</i> [because?] Some of it I picked up because of talking to my dad, <i>but I hated Christians.</i> By this time, when I was talking to my friends while I was out partying with them, <i>'If I ever become a Christian, take my gun and blow my brains out and put me out of my misery.'</i> And that is actually a quote. I would get my friends to swear that because that is how I felt about it.'</p>	<p>David experienced 'deliverance' from suicide and depression and experienced a drastic change to joy and peace:</p> <p>[Is your sense of 'blackness' gone?] 'Yes. When I got delivered from suicide and depression, there is a difference between being delivered and learning a new way to think because I still had a negative outlook on things and I had to learn to be more positive in my outlook. <i>That depression and suicide, that blackness that is so encompassing in anything you do was gone immediately.</i> That right there, more than anything, more than being delivered from drugs or even salvation, <i>that right there was like, 'God, I'm in for life!' I can't exchange that.'</i></p> <p><i>'It was just a drastic change.</i> I actually had one of my druggy friends come by about six months afterwards <i>because it was such a drastic thing moving from, 'I think I hate Christians' to asking Jesus into my life.'</i></p> <p><i>'When I was a young Christian, there was a lot of it that I was ashamed about or had guilt about. I have been a Christian for 20 years now, reading the word all of the time. There's things happen so that I could share them so that they would bless and encourage people. That is why I have no problem about it. There is nothing to hide from me anymore because I have no guilt or shame about it. It is all for God. It is nothing but joy now. Nothing but joy and peace. The peace that I have now compared to the darkness that used to consume me, that is irreplaceable. There is nothing that can replace that.'</i></p>
<p>EMOTIONAL SENSE-MAKING Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #13 Sean</p>	<p>Atheism: Sean admitted to carrying hostility against God and religious people: 'There was nothing about me that wanted to find God or believe in God or know Jesus. I chose the opposite of that. I chose against God. I chose screw the Bible. I chose I don't want to know anything about God, that's stupid. I chose I don't want to have anything to do with your religion, that's stupid. That's what I chose.'</p> <p>'I carried that hostility with me from high school to the city with me and I was just one of those kinds of Atheists that really</p>	<p>Post-conversion: His 'whole world came crashing down' emotionally, mentally and spiritually. He related it to 'Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome Disorder or something'.</p> <p>Later, Sean restored broken relationships, apologizing for his prior behavior: 'So that was hard, having to re-wire my entire brain, thinking, everything, and just come to a completely new understanding of my entire life. And it wasn't until I did that that I could talk to my dad again, <i>make all of these reconnections. I had to call up everyone I knew and apologize to them for</i></p>

	<p>like to argue with Christian and religious people.’³⁸⁵</p> <p>[Sean experienced the death of his best friend at age 22 from cancer, contributing to his contempt.]</p> <p>Catalyst: He began studying to disprove God and the bible, remaining reluctant and resistant through the process of changing his mind: ‘It was really God dragging me through the mud and I was kicking and screaming the whole way. It was a gruesome process. It was hard.’</p>	<p><i>being a jerk.</i> That was tough. I called my old girlfriend I hadn’t talked to in five years and told her, ‘<i>I am so sorry. I was such a jerk. You were right and I was wrong.</i>’ That was really hard. Shameful, you know but God restores and He dealt with that post-trauma.’</p>
<p>EMOTIONAL SENSE-MAKING Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #45 Jennifer</p>	<p>Atheism: Growing up with a strong sense of self-sufficiency and difficulty trusting others, Jennifer did not believe in God, particularly because of her parents: <i>‘And my mom was quite bitter, particularly about God. And I wasn’t going to trust a father figure.</i> My father was in and out of our lives. He was gone quite a bit. And when he did show up he was very difficult or violent or despondent or what not. So, by extension, <i>I wasn’t going to trust a father, and certainly not an eternal father.</i>’</p> <p><i>‘My childhood was happy in many ways. I really enjoyed school. I was really involved in a lot of things. I felt very loved by my mom and somewhat by my dad although he was really troubled. But I also knew that I really had to survive on my own. My doctrine would have been self-sufficiency.’</i></p> <p><i>‘I was more suspicious by nature, which I think is the case when the rug has been pulled right from under you, especially as a child quite often.’</i></p> <p>Catalyst: When she began to consider Atheism and Christianity more seriously, she was ‘irked’ at the authenticity of Christians and the truth of Christianity: ‘I was trying to survive but once I was intrigued by Christianity, at least I started to look into it more seriously, <i>I kicked against it a lot too,</i></p>	<p>Conversion: Jennifer initially held mixed emotions in her progress towards Christianity: ‘And so when I became a Christian I have a <i>lot of conflicting feelings</i> as I was investigating it and also as I was becoming one. And some of it, I have to say was the anger that I initially held towards Christians and the <i>anger and irritation</i> I held towards people like [Christians] who categorically bothered me.’</p> <p>Post-conversion: The anger she once felt towards Christians turned towards those who had limited her knowledge due to secular worldview bias: <i>‘It eventually rotated around and became irritation at this culture that didn’t give me a chance to make my own informed decision.’</i></p> <p><i>‘It wasn’t fair play...You guys want me to have what you have, and I don’t want it. Really, what is your answer to me instead of this - that there’s no meaning and everything is meaningless and there’s actually no absolute truth and that itself is an absolute truth that you are trying to put forward. And I guess I began to realize that all of that began to disintegrate. It just didn’t hold any water.’</i></p> <p>After conversion, she also mourned her life growing up without Christianity, then became grateful for her own experience:</p>

³⁸⁵ (Sean) demonstrated strong emotion against religion and God, in a sense fighting against God or any person who represented God. It is interesting that as a Christian he developed the ‘Fight Club’ through which he teaches young men to ‘fight for’ God and Christianity.

	<p>I wasn't aware of Lewis at the time. I wasn't reading a lot of Lewis or anything at all. Later on, he said he was the most reluctant convert of all of England that he went kicking and screaming. I identified with that entirely because <i>the Christians I met that I realized were really walking their talk irked me at first because I didn't really think that they could be for real. And so, I was trying to poke them apart.</i></p>	<p>'When I first became a Christian, <i>I mourned so much of what I missed.</i> I thought, 'I never got to say grace before my meals.' <i>I envied everybody.</i> I envied [a Christian friend], that his family went to church, that he had this background... But then I realized too what a gift adult conversion is because you have <i>this immense gratitude and this ability to also see how the Lord has given you the dignity and the privilege of choosing...I think there is some way in which you begin to see really what you are without grace and it does change everything and there is clarity.</i>'³⁸⁶</p>
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12.9.6. Purpose and Meaning

Table 79. Purpose and Meaning Narrative Themes

PURPOSE and MEANING	Pre-conversion Metanarrative	Catalyst Narrative	Conversion Narrative	Post-Conversion Metanarrative
Narrative Themes	OLD PURPOSE and MEANING Atheism themes	CHANGING PURPOSE and MEANING themes	NEW PURPOSE and MEANING themes	NEW PURPOSE and MEANING Christian themes
	Enjoying autonomy	Fatigued of hedonism Moral freedom conflicts with moral knowledge	Surrendering 'my will' to 'God's will'	Christian discipling Living an 'embodied Christian life'
	Considered deep questions Positive outlook, No despair	More reflection on deep questions Impressed by beauty		Christian evangelism
	Became troubled about existential issues	Existential dissatisfaction prompts searching		Christian ministry employment or volunteer
	Sober-minded regarding purpose and meaning	Sober-mindedness prompted searching for more		Further education in theology, philosophy, apologetics, ministry
	Demeaning Christians	Dismantle Christianity		Christian apologetics
	Finding purpose in other goals and movements	Changed view about life purpose		Fulfilling God's purposes Dependence on God to fulfill purpose Christian Evangelism

³⁸⁶ Jennifer seems to be in touch with the emotional side of herself throughout the conversion process. Her emotions ranged from anger and resistance to reluctance in becoming a Christian. After conversion, she experienced anger again, mourning/grief and then gratitude. This is quite a range of emotion, but this demonstrates the personal nature of decision making and its effects on the whole self – as she remarked earlier – both 'head and heart'.

PURPOSE and	Atheism Narrative themes ³⁸⁷	Catalyst Narrative themes ³⁸⁸	Conversion Narrative	Post-Conversion
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³⁸⁷ ‘Old Purpose and Meaning’ Atheism Narrative Themes:

Enjoying autonomy: ‘It is fine for me to do the things I want...I am a free man now. I don’t want a cosmic authority, please.’; ‘We are going to die, so let’s make the best of what we’ve got now’; ‘...from an ‘eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die’ mindset, absolutely because it was very much a ‘this life is all you get’ so do what you can with it to enjoy yourself.’ ‘And that was the culture that I was in as well. It was very much that type of hedonism and that seemed to be the driving motivation’; ‘it was a happy hedonism...the absence of a thoughtful life would be the most prominent thing. There was no reflection. You just lived.’ ‘I remember that my view for my life was ...live my life completely for pleasure until my body wore out and then I would kill myself.’; compulsive gambling and drinking; ‘I liked the idea of existentialism as the ‘do what you want and seize the day and create your own destiny.’; (Kyle) (Jason) (John) (Richard) (Carl) (Jeremy)

Considered deep questions: ‘Every once in a while, I would wonder if there was more to life’; ‘Someone in the class was just saying that life was pointless, that we exist to reproduce and nothing else. And I remember at once being both horrified and realizing that maybe that is true.’ ‘I started going out into the world and trying to figure out ‘Who am I?’ ‘What is my place in the world?’ ‘What does it all mean?’ I was the kind of kid who asked those kinds of questions.’; ‘Maybe my later years in the military. I thought about the idea of eternity and what it means to actually die and not exist anymore.’ (Joseph) (Anthony) (Michelle) (Ryan)

Positive outlook, no despair: ‘I don’t think the Nietzsche disparingness of [Atheism] hit me that much’; ‘I mean when you think about it from an ultimate nihilism point of view, no.’ (Kyle) (Jason)

Became troubled about existential issues: ‘It struck me that a lot of people around me paid lip service to their idea of nihilism, the meaninglessness of life, but they seemed relatively unperturbed by it. ...Whereas I felt much more deeply, emotionally struck by it, felt really quite saddened by it.’ ‘I took the logical conclusions of Atheism seriously. If it is true, there is no meaning in life, there is no objective morality, there is none of that kind of stuff...it seemed like my parents were pretty miserable, my friends were overall kind of miserable.’ ‘There is no such thing as a happy, consistent nihilist.’ And that was very much my life. I was trying to be consistent...saying ‘Well, it is what it is,’ but then it also steals all of your hope and all of your joy. Beauty then becomes meaningless. Fulfillment becomes just an illusion.’ ‘I definitely did not find life to be meaningful absent of God; ‘I felt apathetic about life.’ ‘I became a zombie. I merely existed and would’ve continued that way if God had not intervened.’ (Anthony) (Matthew) (Jeremy) (Melissa)

Sober-minded regarding purpose and meaning: ‘I would have never endorsed the view that you should just create meaning. I just saw that as like illusory, a form of wish fulfillment. Basically, I was self-awaredly irrational. I was like, ‘I know I’ve been living as meaning exists, but it doesn’t, and I wish I could be consistent, but I can’t.’; ‘If it turned out that the world was Dawkins’ blind pitiless indifference, then so be it.’ ‘And I got to Harvard I started thinking about these things again... I thought, ‘Maybe I should become a nihilist.’ (Anthony) (Christopher) (Ashley)

Demeaning Christians: ‘I took pride in making believers look and feel stupid’; ‘I made it my mission to learn how to really shred these folks... making my life’s mission to chew on street preachers.’ (Sean) (Jeremy)

Finding purpose in other goals and movements: Environmentalist Movement; ‘I will be a millionaire by the time I’m 30’; vocational success; (Barbara) (Richard) (Carl)

³⁸⁸ ‘Changing Purpose and Meaning’ Catalyst Narrative Themes:

Fatigued of hedonism: ‘I began to wonder if there was more to life than simply hedonistic pursuits’ ‘I pretty much knew if I continued in this lifestyle I was going to die.’ (Joseph) (David)

Moral freedom conflicting with moral ‘oughtness’: ‘I thought I just can’t do that. That ain’t right.’ It was a bit like that. There was a certain degree of liberality, but with moral absolutes in there somewhere but no reason for having them.’; ‘So on the one hand, there is no judgment and there is no way things ought to be; therefore, it is fine for me to do the things I want. And then in another situation I want to say someone else shouldn’t do something.’ ‘I was a very moral Atheist.’ (Joseph) (Kyle) (Ashley)

More reflection on deep questions: ‘I began to wonder if there was more to life than simply hedonistic pursuits. That did resonate. And that’s when I began to think a little bit more about ‘What is the purpose of life? What is the meaning of life? What is my place in the world? What am I going to do with myself?’ (Joseph; Impressed by beauty in creation: ‘I don’t remember what was the catalyst. It was just looking at the beauty of the park and thinking about the whole creation of the universe and all of these things that I said, ‘You know, maybe there is a God.’ (Jason)

Dissatisfaction caused searching for more: ‘I started reading and thinking about God a little bit more, the recognition that even as I am meeting what should qualify as happy in the world, it is not satisfying.’³⁸⁸ Jennifer recognized her own longing for more (see quote above); ‘I remember...the idea of death being very troubling to me, But I was like, it doesn’t really make any sense to me. You are alive. You die. You won’t know it. It won’t matter. Why does that bother me? Why would it bother anyone?’³⁸⁸; But I began to then realize that the option of Atheism held nothing. It was meaningless.’ ‘I was pretty miserable, and I was like, ‘Well, I really don’t want to live like this.’ If there was any meaning to life, I was willing to look into it.’ ‘I had for years embraced agnosticism, then Atheism. My life felt shallow and I wasn’t doing well at it, and I started really wanting answers.’ (Jason) (Jennifer) (Ryan) (Jennifer) (Matthew) (Jessica)

MEANING			themes	Christian themes ³⁸⁹
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Table 80. Purpose and Meaning shift: ‘Emptiness’ to ‘Satisfaction’

Purpose & Meaning BR Shift	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative ‘Emptiness’ to	Post-Conversion Metanarrative ‘Satisfaction’
PURPOSE and MEANING	Atheism: As a teenager, Joseph occasionally thought about big life questions:	Post-conversion:

Sober-mindedness prompted searching for more: ‘And that is where it really hit me, because I think Nietzsche is spot on if you do take Atheism to its logical conclusion. Then there is no such thing as morals anymore. There is no such thing as right or wrong. A purposeful life, it doesn’t mean anything.’ It was something that I soberly recognized and marched on. But that is what caused me to go to my uncle who has a PhD in theology from Oxford University. I basically asked him, I’ve got to know actual, historical, objective evidence for Christianity.’; ‘Obviously, it was attractive that I was intentionally made by an intelligent agent and that I had a purpose, that life had a purpose and that things weren’t completely random. And so, all of that was emotionally appealing to me.’ (Nicholas) (Christopher)

Dismantle Christianity: ‘I began reading the Bible to find faults and contradictions to use against Christians’; ‘I decided to disprove every major world religion.’ ‘That’s what got me into Christianity. Still, I approached it first as, ‘How can I dismantle this? How can I show that it isn’t true? That it doesn’t match with reality?’’ (Sean) (Jeremy)

Changed view about life purpose: ‘And that shaped my view a lot. On the one hand, oh there are still a lot of questions out there but on the other hand, there are also these people that really believe this... and, it is not about not being able to do the things that you want to do in life, it is about living a life and having joy and satisfaction and fulfillment.’ (Jason)

³⁸⁹ **‘New Purpose and Meaning’ Post-Conversion Narrative Themes:**

Christian discipling: ‘A pastor took me under his wing and began to disciple me’; ‘You’ve got to live the life that he has put within us. You’ve got to take it seriously. And so, discipleship for me is a big one for a Christian. Be a disciple first and then try and win somebody, because if you aren’t a disciple, you aren’t convincing anyone at all.’ (Joseph) (Jason)

Living an ‘Embodied Christian Life’; ‘...that was one of the main reasons we moved home, to try and love on my family up close and hopefully live the gospel and entice them to [Jesus].’ ‘Being a Christian is. It is an attitude. It is a lifestyle. It is not just a list of rules that you have to follow.’ (Jennifer) (Nicholas)

Fulfilling God’s will: ‘I will ALWAYS continue in my main purpose of building God’s Kingdom wherever He assigns me.’ ‘So, it has been those kinds of things...listening to the Lord in terms of opportunities asking to be an instrument in it but recognizing and allowing God to be in control because He is³⁸⁹; ‘I am in the process right now of assessing where I am going, what my ultimate purpose is, and why God still has me on this earth. If we weren’t here for a purpose, we might as well just die and go home.’; ‘I can’t be about these things anymore. My life is not my own now. I belong to God.’ ‘And so for me, I think He uses me. God says, ‘Get up and tell them what I did for you. First of all, tell them what you did, and then tell them what I did for you.’ ‘So, I just prayed about what God wanted me to do...I prayed about it and that is where some of the things that I am doing now came from.’ (Barbara) (Jennifer) (Paul) (David) (Carl) (Melissa)

Dependence on God to fulfill purpose: ‘That will be a major work of God to make that happen.’; ‘To me, it is a 180 change, but it is an across the board change. It is not just internally, it is externally and relationally and vocationally, just everything. I know where I would be without God because I was working a dead-end job and I would be dead. So, it’s definitely all credit to God.’ (Barbara) (David)

Christian ministry employment: Vice Director at Christian camp to challenge teen Atheists; Christian author/speaker; Christian education; church employment; (Sean) (Jennifer) (Christopher) (Jessica)

Christian ministry volunteer: ‘I’ve had the privilege of being used by God to begin several major community ministries, worked in church-related ministries’; (Barbara) (Carl)

Further education in theology, philosophy, apologetics, ministry: ‘working on theology degree at university’; ‘I did a masters and PhD in theology’; in graduate study for ministry; MA in apologetics; (Sean) (Joseph) (Jason) (Ryan) (Christopher) (Ashley)

Christian Apologetics: ‘I am teaching the Christian worldview, how to talk with skeptics.’; academic, author, apologist; volunteers in apologetics ministry; works in apologetics ministry; directs university apologetics; ‘I have a podcast teaching how to be good men in the world’; (Sean) (Joseph) (Kyle) (Ryan) (John) (Richard) (Carl) (Christopher) (Ashley) (Michelle)

Christian Evangelism: ‘I am hoping to have an evangelistic Bible study in our neighborhood.’ ‘I am very passionate about dealing with Atheists and skeptics. I love that!’ ‘The mission field is ripe right here. There is so much misinformation and so many people rejecting Christ because of what man does to misrepresent him. It is sad.’ ‘I have given [my personal testimony] from Beijing to LA and on some great mission trips to China and other places too.’; active ‘on mission’; (Barbara) (Sean) (Paul) (Carl) (Jessica)

<p>Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #20</p> <p>Joseph</p>	<p>Because my teenage years were so miserable, and I was kind of wandering. <i>Every once in a while, I would wonder if there was more to life.</i> But it wasn't until the army that I really got that question.</p> <p>Catalyst: Joseph began to sense a purposelessness and meaninglessness in his life and began to reflect on deep questions: 'I joined the Army when I was 17. Basically, I got into the young army guy lifestyle which was work hard, play hard. Doing that for about 18 months, it got kind of boring, just going out with your friends all the time drinking. I got sick of it. I got sick of the hangovers to be honest.</p> <p><i>At that point I began to wonder if there was more to life than simply hedonistic pursuits. That did resonate. And that's when I began to think a little bit more about 'What is the purpose of life? What is the meaning of life? What is my place in the world? What am I going to do with myself?' It was at that point when I began to think more about meaning more cosmically, and to a degree more theologically, and also about what that meant for me and my life and my life choices. But it probably wasn't until that point when I was probably around 19 or so that I began to reflect on those deep questions.'</i>³⁹⁰</p>	<p>Joseph's life turned towards his purposes as directed towards God, first being disciplined in his Christian faith:</p> <p>'And the good thing was the church where I was, this church planting thing, they had a pastor who came in who was just finishing off in seminary. He was mid 20s and he was a really good guy. <i>He really took me under his wing and began to disciple me. I used to meet with him once a week. We did everything from Bible reading together, apologetics, what kind of girl to marry, that kind of thing. And he had a very big influence on me and he nurtured me in the faith.</i></p> <p>Joseph then pursued graduate education in religious studies: 'I did a <i>Master of Ministries</i> at a Baptist College. And then I went to the local university where I get an honors degree. And then I did a <i>PhD in New Testament</i> where I wrote my thesis on Jesus and the Gentile Mission.' Joseph works as a university professor and international lecturer in theology, an author, speaker, and Christian apologist.</p> <p>He tells of his own surprise at the course his life has taken:</p> <p>'The way I tell my story is 'A funny thing happened on the way to Damascus.' <i>I was not expecting to become a Christian theologian when I was in my teenage years. And if someone said to me as a teenager that you will be a theologian and you will travel around the world giving lectures about God, I would've said, 'Really?' I would have said, 'No.'</i> And certainly anyone who knew me would not have thought that as well...<i>Yes, that's my story. I'm always just surprised to be where I am.'</i>³⁹¹</p>
<p>PURPOSE and MEANING</p> <p>Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #46</p>	<p>Atheism: Jason enjoyed the autonomy of self-centered, hedonistic living given through Atheism: 'I mean when you think about it from an ultimate nihilism point of view, no. But from an 'eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we</p>	<p>Catalyst (cont.) He began attending church every week and saw that Christianity and God were not against all of the good things in life, but rather they presented a possible life full of joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment. <i>'And that shaped my view a lot. On the one hand, oh</i></p>

³⁹⁰ Joseph tried to find life through hedonistic pursuits but became bored and empty; now he has found meaningful life through furthering pursuit of God for himself and others. The 'lack' within Atheism and the tension it held for Joseph was alleviated when he moved towards a grounded, cohesive world and worldview found within Christianity. He moved from a sense of 'boredom' and 'meaninglessness' in Atheism and found the cohesive, morally grounded, purposed life in God as fulfilling. Embodying Atheism was not existentially satisfying. Its inability to fulfill, to provide 'good' answers moved Joseph towards reflection, dissatisfaction, and openness to the consideration of something else, something more than what he had seen or experienced in his life.

³⁹¹ It seems often the case that those with a high level of (pre-conversion) resistance are surprised by their own significant life change and high level of commitment post-conversion.

<p>Jason</p>	<p><i>die’ mindset, absolutely because it was very much a ‘this life is all you get’ so do what you can with it to enjoy yourself.’</i> ‘And that was the culture that I was in as well. It was very much that type of <i>hedonism and that seemed to be the driving motivation</i>, particularly for teenagers’ late teens, early 20s males and females. For the guys, particularly, <i>it was very attractive.</i>’</p> <p>Catalyst: As an adult, Jason found himself dissatisfied in life despite reaching life goals: ‘Part of it too was that I had specific goals and they were all financial in nature that I am going to do this, and I’m going to be happy and all of that. As <i>I was reaching those goals, I really wasn’t happy.</i> It really didn’t bring any type of satisfaction that I expected from hitting those milestones.’</p> <p>Existential ‘emptiness’ opened him towards searching for something more: ‘I started reading and thinking about God a little bit more, the recognition that even as I am meeting what should qualify as happy in the world, it is not satisfying. And I don’t know that I thought that much about it at the time but looking back and particularly reading Lewis and some of those, he touches on that quite a bit, that emptiness, that lack that can’t be filled by anything else. So, in hindsight I look back and say, ‘Oh, that’s what was going on at the time.’ But <i>at the time, I was just dissatisfied.</i>’</p>	<p>there are still a lot of questions out there but on the other hand, there are also these people that really believe this... and, <i>it is not about not being able to do the things that you want to do in life, it is about living a life and having joy and satisfaction and fulfillment.</i>’</p> <p>Post-Conversion Stage: Jason found new purpose, meaning and identity as a serious follower of Christ: ‘You’ve got to live the life that [God] has put within us. You’ve got to take it seriously. <i>And so, discipleship for me is a big one for a Christian. Be a disciple first</i> and then try and win somebody, because if you aren’t a disciple, you aren’t convincing anyone at all.’³⁹²</p> <p>He has also seriously considered his role (‘calling’) not only to be a serious disciple but to also disciple others to become serious followers of Jesus: ‘I talked to [a Christian friend] early on in this process, and he said maybe <i>your call</i> is to disciple within the church. Maybe <i>your call</i> is not to outside evangelism or even outside apologetics necessarily. Maybe it’s to discipleship within the church and equipping the church. And I think there may be something to that. <i>I am finding myself more led in that direction, trying to get the body of Christ to act like the body of Christ.</i>’³⁹³</p> <p>He is now actively participating in graduate studies in ministry in order to pursue his ‘calling’.</p>
<p>PURPOSE and MEANING Biographical Reconstruction F2 #44</p>	<p>Atheism: Anthony soberly accepted the negative existential implications of Atheism: ‘I was probably 12 actually, and we were talking about evolution or something in science, and we were talking about the meaning of life. Someone in the class was just saying</p>	<p>Atheism (cont.) The lack of grounding for objective meaning and beauty caused him cognitive dissonance: ‘I guess it was just like the pain of feeling that life was meaningful, and the way that circumstances and events naturally came across to me was that it was full of meaning</p>

³⁹² As an Atheist, Jason found his ‘worldly’ worldview insufficient to provide existential satisfaction and happiness. However, the conflict found in emotional dissonance led him towards further intellectual investigation of truth and the reality of other worldviews. Through his search, he discovered a worldview which resolved his emotional dissonance and replaced it with ‘emotional harmony’ in its explanatory capacity towards purpose, joy, and meaning. His purposes shifted after conversion from self-serving hedonism and selfish gain to helping others know God in a deeper way. He continues to pursue study, not only for himself but also in the service of others in teaching and ministry.

³⁹³ Here, Jason’s language reflects the seriousness with which he has found purpose – not only for himself but for others – and is actively advocating for it. His language of ‘calling’ also demonstrates his sense of God’s purposes for his life.

<p>Anthony</p>	<p>that <i>life was pointless, that we exist to reproduce and nothing else. And I remember at once being both horrified and realizing that maybe that is true.</i></p> <p>'The way I typically put it is that I reached two conclusions at the same time. One is a conditional claim. <i>It is that if God does not exist then life is pointless or sad ultimately.</i> In conjunction with that claim, I reached a further claim that God does not exist...<i>Those two claims entailed that life was pointless.</i></p> <p>He was also struck by those who believed in nihilism but were not saddened by it as he was: 'It struck me that a <i>lot of people around me paid lip service to their idea of nihilism, the meaninglessness of life, but they seemed relatively unperturbed by it. Is seemed that perhaps they didn't really believe it. Whereas I felt much more deeply, emotionally struck by it, felt really quite saddened by it.</i> I mean I knew I was never going to commit suicide or be at risk of depression in any serious sense.</p>	<p>and beauty but <i>that there was a kind of discrepancy between that experiential mode and the reflective mode that told me that it was all illusory. I found the inability to have consistency there very bad. It was terrible news.</i> 'There was certainly a <i>dissonance between my emotional reactions and behavior I guess and what I reflectively thought to be true.</i> Yes. Yeah, roughly.'</p> <p>[Did you get a place where you created meaning in order to enjoy the existential part of your life? You do not want to move into despair and you wanted to live purposefully.]</p> <p>'In a sense, that is always going to be the case unless you are just going to commit suicide. Then you probably see something as meaningful. But <i>I would have never endorsed the view that you should just create meaning. I just saw that as like illusory, a form of wish fulfillment.</i> Basically, <i>I was self-awaredly irrational. I was like, 'I know I've been living as meaning exists, but it doesn't, and I wish I could be consistent, but I can't.'</i> So, yeah.'</p> <p>Catalyst: Anthony encountered a Christian family who seemed genuinely happy.</p> <p>Post-conversion: After becoming a Christian he pursued academic study in Christian apologetics at Oxford and philosophy at the post-graduate level (studying health and happiness, how emotions inform religious beliefs.).</p>
<p>PURPOSE and MEANING Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F3 #42 Richard</p>	<p>Atheism:</p> <p>Holding a nihilist perspective, life was essentially meaningless for Richard:</p> <p>'I did believe that there was right and wrong but if you pushed me ultimately, I would've said <i>everything is meaningless.</i> And as a teenager, my thinking was, and it is funny we are talking about this now because, as I teenager I remember that my view for my life was I was going to leave home, make as much money as I could, be a millionaire by 30, <i>live my life completely for pleasure until my body wore out and then I would kill myself.</i> And that was my worldview at my mid-teens, 15 or 16 years old.'</p> <p>Post-Conversion:</p>	<p>Post-Conversion (cont.)</p> <p>'What does my [Christian] worldview offer? My worldview offers, in my worldview the requirement is you have to take a step of faith to believe it. But once you take that step of faith <i>you gain everything. You gain meaning. You gain purpose. You gain eternal life. You gain explanatory power. You've got a basis for your morality and so on.</i> But you've got to take that step of faith. And, until you take that, you can't have anything. So, you're locked in your other worldview.'</p> <p>He describes the difference between transient meaning without God and ultimate meaning in God: 'Meaning is all about connection. So, a painting on the wall may have real strong meaning for you because maybe it's your mother's and it's connected to the house you grew up in. So, the painting has</p>

	<p>Richard sees ultimate meaning and purpose as grounded in God: ‘Let’s talk about the explanatory power of the worldviews. What does your [Atheistic] worldview offer me? <i>Does it offer me hope after I die? Does it offer me meaning? No.</i> It gives me temporal meaning, but because I can’t connect to the infinite, because there is no infinite in that worldview being all meaning is confined to the box we live in and it is ultimately – in science I talk about this – ultimately, <i>all the meaning you believe you have is all basically chemical reactions because there’s nothing else. That’s all there is. So, in your worldview you can’t give me any meaning, true meaning. You can’t give me any true, purposeful life, so I just might as well be a hedonist if I want. You can’t give me any basis for morality. You can’t explain to me why the universe is fine-tuned. You have to invoke multi-verses. You have to invoke something coming from nothing</i>, like Lawrence Kraus has done and basically lie about what nothing means because you are so desperate to get around Big Bang Cosmology. You’re in denial about biology because the biological systems, even like Dawkins says has the appearance of design. Anyone who’s done engineering like I’ve done laughs that any of these things could have happened by chance. So that’s what your worldview offers.’</p>	<p>all these connections to things around you, so it has meaning for you. But that meaning for me, that painting is worthless to me. I don’t care about all those things. But ultimately, unless you’ve got connections beyond the temporal, you haven’t actually got any ultimate meaning.’</p> <p>‘There’s a really interesting quote from John Paul Sartre where he says something like ‘a finite point in an infinite nothing can have no meaning.’ And that’s what we are. We are a finite point, effectively in an infinite space and time. If the universe is big and it’s old and it’s going to go on forever in the materialist worldview, we’re nothing. We’re basically a finite point in an infinite nothing. Richard Dawkins says, ‘I’m so happy as a human being that I will die and become one with the cosmos one day.’ Really? Is that your worldview? Is that all you are looking forward to? It’s insane.’</p>
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Table 81. Purpose and Meaning shift: ‘My will’ to ‘God’s will’

Purpose & Meaning BR Shift	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative	Post-Conversion Metanarrative
	‘My purposes’ to	‘God’s purposes’
<p>PURPOSE and MEANING Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #13 Sean</p>	<p>Atheism: A teen, Sean sought to demean Christians and dismantle Christianity: <i>‘I took pride in making believers look and feel stupid as they could not give me logical answers to my questions or provide evidence supporting the existence of God and the validity of their faith. I began reading the Bible in hopes to find more contradictions, faults and fractures, and generally anything that seemed absurd to me to use against Christians as I happened upon them.’</i></p> <p>Post-conversion:</p>	<p>He describes himself as ‘very passionate’ in engaging with Atheists and skeptics: <i>‘I have been very passionate about dealing with Atheists and sceptics. I love that. I got hired to be a vice director at a Christian camp around here and my job is basically to challenge those teenage kids that claim to be Atheists. It is not a huge camp, but 17 kids last year got saved. It has been like that every year. God has been amazing...Some think I am too harsh, too forward, too forceful, but 17 kids got saved! If they did it out of fear for God, good. Fear God. He is the true and living God. Is bigger than you. He controls your life. But He loves you. He is not playing with you.</i></p>

	<p>Sean is now active in studying and promoting the Christian worldview: He has a podcast ‘Men’s Honor Group’ – how to be good men in the world; teaches teens how to approach skeptics and agnostics with his curriculum, ‘Fight Club’; pursuing a bachelor’s degree in liberal arts studies; owns a business moving seniors to assisted/retirement living; completed two years at university in theology.³⁹⁴</p>	<p>He wants to control your life. They respond in so many different ways.’</p> <p>‘I started a group called Fight Club where I teach these guys how to deal with skeptics and Atheists the way that I do. And a lot of these guys who were skeptics and Atheists, who were rebelling against their parents’ religion, they got saved at camp, they come and study the Bible and learn how to answer skeptical questions. I break it down into those four categories: moral, scientific, spiritual and biblical skepticism and teach them how to get to the root objection, teach them how to control the conversation so that they are not on the defense. All of those tactics that I used to help bring you to Christ, I am going to teach you how to use those with your friends, family, and people in your circle who were just like you. I have been doing Fight Club for two years now and finally presented my curriculum/lesson plans to my pastor, and he is thinking about letting me teach a class at church, to learn to do spiritual battle with Atheists and sceptics.’</p>
<p>PURPOSE and MEANING Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #45 Jennifer</p>	<p>Atheism: Growing up, Jennifer was ‘busy surviving’ within a divorced family of two alcoholic parents, working several jobs until she got to university.</p> <p>Post-Conversion: Jennifer left her academic career to ‘live out the gospel’ to her ‘unbelieving’ family and friends, moving to another country: ‘That is an ongoing prayer for me personally, still having so much of an unbelieving family and unbelieving friends. I come from a largely unbelieving world. I pray over that all the time...<i>And that was one of the main reasons we moved home, to try and love on my family up close and hopefully live the gospel and entice them to it and others as well in a way that wasn’t just phone or email.</i> And I will say that one of the things I am trying to learn, and I</p>	<p>Post-Conversion (cont.) She lives in a prayerful awareness of helping others become Christians:</p> <p>‘And I pray that the Lord gives me the discernment to be present and available because <i>there are the opportunities.</i>’ ‘So, it has been those kinds of things, <i>with our own hearts just being more discerning and listening to the Lord in terms of opportunities and prayer.</i> And not putting so much pressure on ourselves to be everything, asking to be an instrument in it but recognizing and <i>allowing God to be in control because He is.</i> And that takes tremendous pressure off us and allows us less active, because I am always messing it up. I am. I am always messing it up. <i>But, to be really loving, present and available, because that is what spoke to me. That is what spoke to me about people.</i>’³⁹⁵</p>

³⁹⁴ At first, Sean used his intellect to argue with Christians; now he uses his intellect to teach and lead others to know more about God, Christianity, and reality from a Christian worldview perspective. He is highly committed and passionate about the Christian worldview and moving other Atheists and skeptics towards God. It appears the intensity with which he resisted God is now being used with intensity towards bringing others to God.

³⁹⁵ Jennifer’s life is focused upon God’s desires in and for her life. She sees this not as oppressive or negative but rather in a positive light, ‘taking the pressure off’ of her own self in living an embodied Christian life.

	do realize what a sinner I am and then I fall so short in it all the time, but <i>really trying to live out being available.</i>	
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12.9.7. Personal Will and Desire

Table 82. Personal Will and Desire Narrative Themes

Personal Will and Desire Narrative Themes	Pre-conversion Metanarrative OLD WILL & DESIRE Atheism themes	Catalyst Narrative CHANGING WILL & DESIRE themes	Conversion Narrative NEW WILL & DESIRE themes	Post-Conversion Metanarrative NEW WILL & DESIRE Christian themes
	Intellectual sense-making: Open but belief not credible	Intellectual sense-making and/or Spiritual experience Approach/Avoidance; Skeptical Openness	Open to God and Christianity	Openness to God's will
	Volitional Will, Moral Resistance, Pride, 'Blindness' – closed to God	Personal Crisis Existential Need Experiential Change	Surrendering 'my will' to God's will	
	Cultural /Context Influences – closed to God	Socio-cultural Influences: positive experience with Christians (intellectually, experientially, relationally) made Christianity more attractive		
	Emotional sense-making (anger, pain, contempt) – closed to God	Genuine care, concern, sincerity from Christian		
	Spiritual Openness (but not to Christianity)	Became open to spirituality generally; Active searching		
Personal Will and Desire	Old Personal Will & Desire Atheism themes ³⁹⁶	Changing Will & Desire Catalyst Narrative	New Will & Desire Conversion	New Will & Desire

³⁹⁶ 'Old Personal Will and Desire' Atheism Narrative Themes:

Intellectual sense-making: Open but belief not credible: 'I saw Christianity as far more desirable but, regrettably, it seemed to me, it was not possible for modern persons to rationally believe Christianity. So, I wanted God and the Christian narrative to be true, but my mind just could not accept it.' Amanda was open to Christianity because it was 'beautiful' but was convinced it was not true.' I would say I almost wanted there to be something at that time just to make sense of it all, but I was very, very skeptical that it could even be possible, or even be there, that there was anything to it. There was a point where I wanted it to be true, but I was skeptical that it could be true.' 'I had my mind open to follow the evidence wherever

Narrative Themes		themes ³⁹⁷	themes	PostConversion Christian themes ³⁹⁸
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Table 83. Personal Will and Desire shift: ‘Closed’ to ‘Open’

Personal Will & Desire BR Shift	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative OLD WILL and DESIRE ‘Closed’ to	Post-Conversion Metanarrative NEW WILL and DESIRE ‘Open’
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the evidence could lead.’ ‘I was open to the existence of God and independently trying to seek Him, but seemingly to no avail.’ (Anthony) (Amanda) (Matthew) (Heather)

Volitional Will, Moral Resistance, Pride, ‘Blindness’ – closed to God: ‘So it’s really not that I didn’t believe. I think that it was because I did not want to believe.’ [What keeps us from belief and faith?] - ‘Ultimately, the issue is the heart We’re hard...We’re stubborn and we’re not going to give in. We’re proud’; ‘I think for me, the big thing was, if God is real, His love, His ‘thereness’ would be more obvious. Unfortunately, I was not open to all of the ways he is there...I was blind.’ (Sean) (Richard) (Melissa)

Cultural /Context Influences – closed to God: Joseph considered Christians as ‘stupid’ and anti-intellectual; And I ridiculed them. I thought this was insane.’ ‘I was a committed Atheist & openly mocked those who believed in God.’ (Joseph) (Richard)

Emotional sense-making (anger, pain, contempt) – closed to God: [See ATH Emotional Sense-making]

Spiritual Openness but not to Christianity: ‘in college, I felt a kind of seeking. I was actually open spiritually, more than any other part of my life up until then, and certainly for a long time after. [experimented with Wicca]’; began experiencing Eastern faiths. (Michelle) (Jessica)

³⁹⁷ ‘Changing Personal Will and Desire’ Catalyst Narrative Themes:

Intellectual sense-making and/or Spiritual experience: Introduced to intellectual credibility or reality of God: [see also Intellectual sense-making - Catalyst]; ‘I guess I wanted to give it a shot and so I was like, “Well, if there’s something out there, show me.”; I became open to various forms of spirituality. I became more seriously interested in Christianity through watching debates online; met an intelligent Christian and became open after substantive discussions and gracious tone; ‘And I supposed as well as you get older, you maybe start to realize that some of your reflection was just not as informed as you thought it was, and there is this whole bigger world out there. You realize that you haven’t read that much really. So I guess in the name of epistemic humility, you decide to put things back on the table. That was a large factor. (Matthew) (Christopher) (Ashley) (Jeremy) (Heather) (Anthony)

Approach/Avoidance; Skeptical Openness: ‘Once I was intrigued by Christianity, at least I started to look into it more seriously, I kicked against it a lot too, I wasn’t aware of Lewis at the time. I wasn’t reading a lot of Lewis or anything at all. Later on, he said he was the most reluctant convert of all of England that he went kicking and screaming. I identified with that entirely.’; ‘I think it was more at a place of not total openness. It was more like skeptical openness.’ (Jennifer) (Paul)

Personal Crisis

(emotional; experiential) (Paul) (Carl) (See also CAT Experiential)

Existential Need (See CAT Purpose/Meaning)

Experiential Change: After moving to another state, she became open to ‘new kinds of thinking’: ‘When people are in new situations, they are more open to new kinds of thinking...I think I was open-minded in all of those years.’ (Barbara)

Socio-cultural Influences: positive experience with Christians (intellectually, experientially, relationally) made Christianity more attractive: ‘That was where I went from being absolutely sure that there wasn’t a God to there might be, and as time went as I listened more, I began to hear more and receive. So, I think the walls fell in that sense...So, they were very helpful in that and very willing to go through that process, so that really led to, yeah.’ ‘He was unfailingly patient and kind with others in the comments section. I sought him out at a talk that we both attended, and I told him that I appreciated his tone.’; ‘At that point I had not been doing a lot of intellectual thinking about religion and faith. But I was certainly open to the prospect that there was more to life and I believed, the Christians were showing me a world that had meaning, that had a moral compass, that made sense. And there was also an experiential element.’ (John) (Heather) (Joseph) (Anthony)

Genuine care, concern, sincerity from Christian: (See CAT Experiential; CAT Emotional Sense-Making)

Became open to spirituality generally: ‘Over time, my Atheism softened, and I became more interested in and accepting of spirituality in general. I researched Buddhism, Wicca, and various forms of New Age spirituality. I did not subscribe to any of them, but I was intrigued and more or less open.’ (Christopher)

³⁹⁸ ‘New Personal Will and Desire’ Post-Conversion Narrative Themes:

Openness to God (See PCON Purpose & Meaning)

<p>PERSONAL WILL and DESIRE Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #13 Sean</p>	<p>Atheism: Sean admitted his Atheism was volitionally based, he 'did not want to believe': 'I don't know if there was anything in particular that just made me believe that there was no God. When I look back, there were so many times where as an Atheist I was writing things where I was talking about God. So, it's really not that I didn't believe. <i>I think that it was because I did not want to believe.</i>'</p> <p>Sean expressed strong animosity and resistance towards Christians and Christianity during Atheism (See ATH Emotional Sense-Making; ATH Context & Community).</p> <p>Studying the bible in order to disprove it, he found himself surprisingly opened towards conversion (See ATH/ CAT Canonical Text).</p>	<p>Post-Conversion: In hindsight, Sean realized his closed-posturing towards God and others: 'Like it was difficult for a lot of people to get through to me. A lot of people probably could have answered my questions and probably did but <i>I just didn't have ears to hear.</i>'</p> <p>He now appreciates the volitional will (heart) and intellect (head) in talking with others about Christianity: 'But on the other hand, you can't just argue people in. Because if people are actually in active rebellion against God, it's not arguments that they lack. It is a changed heart and you can't strictly argue people, you've got to have a combination of both.'</p>
<p>PERSONAL WILL and DESIRE Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #25 Kyle</p>	<p>Atheism: Kyle did not want Christianity to be true due to desire for personal freedom as well as perceiving Atheism as a noble pursuit:</p> <p>It was during my gap year and University years that I lost the Christian faith of my teenage years, which was probably a superficial one anyway. Having left the authority of my parents, Christianity became less familiar, less desirable, and seemed increasingly absurd. <i>I didn't want a Cosmic Authority having left my parents' authority, and it seemed a more noble pursuit to face the challenges and details of life as an Atheist.</i></p> <p>'I had both sincere doubts about Christianity, but also <i>insincere objections because I didn't want it to be true.</i>'</p> <p>[Why did you not want Christianity?]</p> <p>'I probably bought into the stereotypes of it. I did drama and theatre at university as well. That is a liberal, artistic environment where people are encouraged to be very open with each other, very free expressive, and it is very easy, especially among that kind of crowd when they are into the more</p>	<p>Catalyst: After he began to believe the truth of Christianity, he still 'held out' for 4-5 years due to his continued desire for personal freedom: 'Overall, from the beginning of looking into this stuff to becoming a Christian that was about four years, maybe five. I think you could say there was at least a year where from a strictly academic point of view I was thinking this stuff looks like it's true but <i>I still held out against it for a while because I still wanted to live in a certain way and not get on board yet.</i>'</p> <p>In hindsight, Kyle shows insight into the combination of factors which played into his closed posture and his decisions: <i>'I think a lot of stuff just had to fall away first. There were all sorts of, you know, it wasn't just intellectual arguments.</i> There were all sorts of foolish stuff going on that, since university, I've been with a particular girlfriend and that have lasted a while and then stopped. Then I had to move to a different place, so <i>there were loads of personal things happening as well.</i> It's definitely a combination of the intellectual stuff and living things out, trying. So it is definitely not just one thing. <i>But, I would say that the apologetics stuff was crucial to knocking certain obstacles away which maybe</i></p>

	<p>hedonistic aspects...It is so easy to latch on to the <i>stereotypes of puritanical, boring Christians who are afraid of expression and just needs to feel moralistic</i> and say, 'Oh, I don't like that word, I don't like your swearing,' for example, Using bad language. And then the typical response would be to say, 'Oh you are missing the integrity artistically,' all that kind of stuff.</p> <p>So, it looked like a <i>closed minded, boring, stifling</i> kind of thing. I didn't think that I needed it either. It's just very easy to have what you want, having new experiences, wanting to get into that environment.'</p> <p>'And then you can flag up so many issues about sexuality...I think for a while <i>the attractiveness of Atheism was defined by it not being Christianity</i>. It's attractive to think I am not going to be judged. It's attractive to think that I could sleep with anyone I want or use whatever language I want or make any decisions that I want or go and get drunk or whatever. At least theoretically, <i>it seemed like the idea of freedom and casting off shutters and being liberated.</i>'</p>	<p><i>even opened up the pathways to have other types of barriers broken down.</i></p> <p>So, there was a bit of an intellectual smokescreen, an academic objection that you are really using to cover-up for an emotional objection that distract from, 'Hey, I really want to do this or that or whatever.' <i>Well if the apologetics can knock down that, then the defense is gone, and you are that bit closer to looking at your own heart and your own inclinations.</i> So, it wasn't just academic, but it was a crucial part nonetheless.'</p> <p>Conversion: Eventually, Kyle decided he needed to drop his resistance to Christianity: 'I realized that I believed Christianity, and was starting to behave like one, so I might as well officially be one, and <i>drop the resistance!</i>'</p> <p>'I was realizing, 'Hang on a second. Let's just check what you're doing. You appear to be praying right now. Could it be you are actually a Christian? That was the point of just thinking, 'Okay, look, just do it, just get on with it! Do it, you know.'"</p>
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Table 84. Personal Will and Desire shift: 'Open' to 'More Open'

Personal Will & Desire BR Shift	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative OLD WILL and DESIRE 'Open' to	Post-Conversion Metanarrative OLD WILL and DESIRE 'More Open'
PERSONAL WILL and DESIRE Biographical Reconstruction F2 #44 Anthony	<p>Anthony was open towards the possibility of God's existence, but he did not see it as intellectually credible:</p> <p><i>'I saw Christianity as far more desirable but, regrettably, it seemed to me, it was not possible for modern persons to rationally believe Christianity. So, I wanted God and the Christian narrative to be true, but my mind just could not accept it.'</i></p> <p><i>'I didn't want God not to exist. That didn't particularly please me. I was fairly convinced that God, as traditionally conceived, was not intellectually defensible but I hoped that there might be all the same some form of transcendence that is out there maybe</i></p>	<p>Anthony began investigating Christianity and was surprised by its substantive intellectual defensibility:</p> <p><i>'And so they gave me some books to read. I can remember I guess the first time when the shift occurred from 'Okay I've put this back on the table, I am intrigued by it,' to a place when I went 'Whoa, this is actually intellectually defensible in an objective way.'</i> It was after they gave me the first book of apologetics and I read it.'</p> <p>This discovery opened him towards other lines of evidence and eventually towards conversion:</p> <p><i>'Yeah, they all seemed really convincing to me. So, I was like, 'Wow, the evidence isn't what I thought it was.' Which made me think, 'Well, what else have I got wrong?' ...And, I</i></p>

	articulated by another religion but perhaps not. ³⁹⁹	mean I recognized that if Christianity is true, then certain things are in place to make things more existentially bearable, which would be great, I mean you don't necessarily have to be a physical determinist because maybe there is some immaterial aspect to us. Yeah, all sorts of things.'
PERSONAL WILL and DESIRE Biographical Reconstruction S1 #15 Nicholas	Atheism: Nicholas's parents had an openness 'towards everything': Even though his mother was a practicing Mormon and his father a practicing Lutheran, 'They were very open and transparent with everything so there was no confusion at all.' His openness allowed him wide reading, influencing him towards Atheism. Catalyst: When Nicholas began reading Nietzsche, he recognized the lack of grounding for objective purpose in life, prompting him towards openness and pursuit of an alternative worldview: 'And that is where it really hit me, because I think Nietzsche is spot on if you do take Atheism to its logical conclusion. Then there is no such thing as morals anymore. There is no such thing as right or wrong. <i>A purposeful life, it doesn't mean anything.</i> ' It was something that I soberly recognized and marched on. But <i>that is what caused me to go to my uncle who has a PhD in theology from Oxford University. I basically asked him, I got to know actual, historical, objective evidence for Christianity.</i> '	Catalyst (cont.): He then approached the evidence for Christianity with an intellectual openness: 'I would say that it is not like I was looking for the evidence, but I would say that <i>I had my mind open to follow the evidence wherever the evidence could lead.</i> So, in other words, it was not like I was looking for that answer, but I wasn't going to read it and be totally skeptical of what I was finding there.' Conversion: After an intellectual search, he 'had strong philosophical and scientific evidence that something existed' and became open towards the experiential reality of God through prayer and worship. A personal spiritual encounter with God was intellectually, experientially, emotionally, and spiritually convincing for him: 'I would describe myself as a Christian after that point because I was able to see all of these traits of God coming together in the person of Jesus...at that point I would say I definitely believed.'
PERSONAL WILL and DESIRE Biographical Reconstruction S3 #38 Heather	Atheism: As an Atheist, Heather was willing to discuss the existence of God with a Christian. In fact, she initiated communication with him after reading his newspaper editorial. 'I first heard of him through reading his interactions in the local newspaper. He had written a letter to the editor and while I disagreed with everything in it, he	Catalyst/Conversion: Heather remained open to discuss 'where the evidence led' in her ongoing discussion: 'Eventually I came to the point where I realized I could not be certain about either Atheism or Christianity but needed to make a decision about what seemed most likely. Despite great effort, I was not able to refute his arguments (specifically his argument for the existence of free will and its implications) and the 'arguments' for Atheism now seemed

³⁹⁹ This is a striking statement expressing Anthony's desire towards God's existence even as an Atheist. However, his desire did not override his intellectual integrity. He could not believe without sufficient intellectual justification.

	<p>was unfailingly patient and kind with others in the comments section. I sought him out at a talk that we both attended, and I told him that I appreciated his tone.⁴⁰⁰</p>	<p>like very poor ones. I felt like I had no choice but to admit that Christianity was probably true. <i>Prior to these experiences I was open to the existence of God and independently trying to seek Him, but seemingly to no avail.</i></p> <p>Post-conversion: Heather maintains an openness towards learning, freedom from judgment: ‘My point is that it is helpful to have other people who are open you let show you. <i>You don’t have to be afraid if you are not sure or if you change your mind, you don’t have to worry about judgment I guess about that.</i></p>
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12.9.8. Intellectual Sense-Making

Table 85. Intellectual Sense-Making Narrative Themes

INTELLECTUAL SENSE- MAKING Narrative Themes	Pre-conversion Metanarrative OLD INTELLECTUAL SENSE-MAKING Atheism themes	Catalyst Narrative CHANGING INTELLECTUAL SENSE-MAKING themes	Conversion Narrative NEW SENSE-MAKING INTELLECTUAL themes	Post-Conversion Metanarrative NEW SENSE-MAKING INTELLECTUAL Christian themes
	Presumed Atheist belief	Intellectual quest; Comparing Christianity to other religions	Finding intellectual answers in Christianity	Views Christianity as a coherent, comprehensive worldview
	Uninformed in Christian beliefs	Commitment to truth; Accepting ‘I was wrong’	Ease in believing Christianity	Developed a ‘thinking faith’:
	Context fostered disbelief: lack of personal exposure; media; University; New Atheist writings	Context/Life change thinking encouraged; Disappointment with Atheist arguments; Doubting Atheism; Reading New Atheists led to Christian writings	Long process of coming to believe Christianity as true	Believes God is real, Christianity is true and rational: university education in theology, philosophy, apologetics
	Believed Christianity man-made, anti-intellectual, unscientific Attempted to undermine Christian belief	Christianity intellectually ‘made sense’; Following the evidence	Conversion more than intellectual belief	Counters ‘anti-intellectual’ Christian stereotypes; Embodying an informed Christian belief

⁴⁰⁰ This shows how manner/tone of one can produce openness in another, a willingness to pursue and engage rather than to distance and potentially ridicule.

	Believed Christianity was stupid, strange, irrational, inferior	Attended church, bible study	Frustration at lack of earlier exposure to the credibility of the Christian worldview	Bible reading/study
	Suffering/pain in the world		Resistance to conversion	Works/volunteers in Christian apologetics
	Nominal Christian belief did not seem to make any practical difference:	Embodied Christianity 'made sense'		Difficulty in changing to and embodying new beliefs
	Christians could not provide good answers to questions	Interaction with informed Christians; Cultural religious caricatures, lies countered	Continuing skepticism	Continuing skepticism; Once compelling Atheist arguments now weak
	Drawn to beauty and imagination of literature			
	Took Atheistic beliefs and implications seriously	Cognitive dissonance caused questioning		

	Atheism themes ⁴⁰¹	Catalyst themes ⁴⁰²	Conversion themes ⁴⁰³	Post-Conversion themes ⁴⁰⁴
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⁴⁰¹ ‘Old Intellectual Sense-making’ ATHEISM Narrative Themes:

Presumed Atheist belief: ‘I was just that dumb, hard-core Atheist and had no good arguments and just had no reason. A rebel without a clue.’; ‘I was not an analytical Atheist.... It was just an identity.’; ‘It was just taken for granted that a mindless, development over time is how things just were. That was something that I just sort of adopted. It was like, ‘Here’s science. Science wins. That’s it.’; ‘There was no real reason to actually consider that my own views might not be correct. It just really wasn’t a concern.’; ‘I just accepted what I was being told and took the ball and ran with it.’; ‘I never asked the question, ‘What is the grounding of my worldview?’ It was the kind of question that it never occurred for me to ask.’; ‘I did not have a real intellectual Atheism. It was just that I have a lot of doubts about Christianity. I didn’t have a really good grounding.’ (Sean) (Jason) (Ryan) (Paul) (Michelle) (Melissa)

Took Atheist beliefs seriously: ‘I took the logical conclusions of Atheism seriously. If it is true, there is no meaning in life, there is no objective morality, there is none of that kind of stuff.’ ‘I just took it to its logical conclusion...I just thought ‘Well, if this is true, there just are no moral facts. And, morality is just me playing along with the system, but really, I can do, you know, whatever I want. If there is no repercussion or afterlife and there is nothing that pertains to it, it is just a means of us cooperating. So, I can act selfishly here if it is in my self-interest, do something that could be seen as totally wrong or I could do something that could be seen as totally right. I am still going to be doing it out of selfish desire to promote something that I want.’; ‘I could not find justification for things like beauty or morality and that really spun me out...Beauty then becomes meaningless. Fulfillment becomes just an illusion.’ (Matthew) (Jeremy)

Uninformed in Christian beliefs: ‘It wasn’t something I thought through a tremendous amount.’; ‘Nothing...I had zero concept of a higher power, what that meant, what that looked like. Anything. There was no concept there. I did not grasp it.’ ‘And no one had even said to me on a very straight basis, ‘Do you know who Jesus is?’ ‘Have you given it any thought?’; ‘I thought it was a mythology. I hadn’t read it.’; ‘I kind of classified Christianity, the example I give is I put it in the category with like golf and chess. I found it not very interesting, but I didn’t hate it...I didn’t know anything about what anybody believed, and certainly what Christians believed, I never was challenged to think that is an inadequate explanation for what people actually believe because I just never knew.’; ‘So my impression was that the God of Christianity was, I certainly didn’t think that He existed. I thought it was more of a product of myth. And even if he did exist, it seemed like a wildly incoherent fairy tale.’ (Barbara) (Sean) (Jennifer) (John) (Michelle) (Jeremy)

Context fostered disbelief: ‘Twenty-one years on a ranch out in the middle of nowhere in a little town... You didn’t question it. Religion was attractive and intriguing, but it was just silly.’; ‘David Attenborough ...These TV programs were very popular programs, but the message through it all was Darwin, Darwin, Darwin. It was obvious for a kid like me. It was obvious. You don’t need God. So, my whole world view was shaped very much by that.’; ‘My parents are both Atheists...I was a militant Atheist from a young age, believing that belief in God was irrational...My dad is a philosopher. Growing up, I would go with him to his classes and so I heard some of these arguments very early on. But I was also taught very strongly to reason logically.’ (Sean) (Richard) (Ashley)

Education / University fostered disbelief: ‘...made me think, ‘Well, Is there really a God out there? Does he really do everything that we have learned about in church? And does it really matter?’’ ‘...going to university, that is when you get bombarded with all kinds of alternative ideas, you are out there on your own...Christianity just didn’t make sense anymore.’; ‘...around college, that was when I started changing in my thinking. I had an Intro to Philosophy class in my freshman year and my professor was Atheist ...That is really when it started to change.’; ‘It was a secular university. The dominant ethos was ‘Christianity is a superstition. It is passé. Science is true.’ So, I was getting that. And the more I went on with my education, the more I got that. And I bought it hook, line, and sinker. Of course, I did. Why would I not? It’s what they were teaching us. It was implicit.’ (Barbara) (Kyle) (Amanda) (Michelle)

Atheist writings: ‘I got into the New Atheists’ writings and speaking, and their view seemed far more attractive and plausible over Christian views.’; ‘I started reading Bertrand Russell and all sorts of things, trying to confirm for myself that God didn’t exist at all...Visiting all of these places, reading all of these books. By the time I was 27 or 28, I realized that my whole focus in my free time is trying to determine that there is no God.’ (Kyle) (Jessica)

Christianity is man-made, untrue, unscientific: ‘All I can remember now was it was kind of something that somebody made up historically’; ‘God was a man-made construct and it was a mechanism for controlling people and it was a crutch for people that were weak and needed to believe in something and it was just unevolved thought that unscientific people had.’; ‘I thought people made up answers to questions that bothered everyone...I thought religion was created as a system to control people... I always just assumed, like yeah, because they didn’t really have any good reasons to believe what they do.’; ‘science had disproven God, that you could not hold a traditional concept of God because it was logically incompatible with the existence of evil.’; ‘It was just something that was good for families and people. And maybe it helped keep certain people moral, that type of thing.’; ‘I bought the science line hook, line, and sinker.’; ‘And my thinking about that was that Darwin had disproven religion and so God is no longer necessary. There was an obvious connection to me that it was either God or Darwin.’ ‘And, teaching in class about Darwinian evolution – that didn’t destroy faith in God necessarily but just seeing that, wow, there’s not really a need for a Creator. So, that’s when I started to have doubts or just be skeptical or not really believe at all.’; ‘Religion was more along the lines of flavor of the month, whatever you felt like was real. And that had nothing to do with the reality of its truth...neither of you are looking at the scientific evidence that is objective that

anybody can look at.’ [Christianity is] culture and people tell each other stories to account for things we don’t understand and now we know better. These stories are what people used to believe to explain stuff.’ That was my vague catchall.’ (Barbara) (Jason) (Ryan) (Anthony) (Amanda) (Paul) (Richard) (Matthew) (Nicholas) (Michelle)

Christianity is anti-intellectual: ‘It is boring. And it seems anti-intellectual. That is the starting point. That is what gives Atheism all of its credibility in that context.’; ‘I didn’t really think that most of them believed it.’; ‘the fundamentalists, those I thought were very anti-intellectual.’; ‘I thought there was no factual evidence about God. I thought religion was a feeling.’ ‘I felt like religion was more of a comforter than anything. In my mind, they were religious because they had never looked further into it. They never read any books. They never really dug into it.’; ‘I came to doubt Christianity primarily because of specific claims that seemed exceedingly unlikely to me (e.g., historical Adam and Eve). The ‘war’ on evolution cemented my belief that Christians did not take science seriously and were generally not capable of being objective or changing their beliefs. So, I thought I was an Atheist for primarily intellectual reasons.’; ‘I couldn’t believe something for which I felt there was no evidence.’ (Kyle) (Jason) (Amanda) (John) (Nicholas) (Heather) (Melissa)

Believed Christianity was stupid, strange, irrational, inferior: ‘It just seemed very hokey and just kind of ‘imaginary friendish’, and kind of ‘secret societyish’...cultish... weird.’; ‘I grew up thinking that religious is stupid, for the weak.’; ‘The idea of there being in heaven was just cartoonish and silly I would feel like a bit of an idiot to try and picture the thing in my head. I would think no one actually believes that.’; ‘[Christianity] was just kind of irrational, that the reasons people give for believing it were poor.’ ‘I actually viewed it stereotypically ridiculous.’; ‘It was foolishness and silliness that was outdated. It was something from a by-gone era. It was irrelevant to the modern life. It was superstition.’ (Sean) (Joseph) (Kyle) (Anthony) (Jennifer) (Richard)

Attempted to undermine Christian belief: ‘I took pride in making believers look and feel stupid...I knew enough to ask some questions.’; ‘There was one point at which I was very hostile towards it. I thought you were just deluding themselves. It was, I don’t want to say it was a harmful delusion, but it was just like, ‘Why don’t you just deal with reality the way that is?’ and ‘Why are you kidding yourself with this nonsense, with miracles and all of this stuff?’ ‘Obviously, we don’t see any of that stuff.’; ‘not only did I have that strong hatred of Christians, I would verbally battle we Christian and try to get them to turn away from God.’; ‘So we would interact with people who had Christian backgrounds and we would basically ridicule them and dismantle their arguments.’ (Sean) (Matthew) (David) (Jeremy)

Nominal Christianity did not seem to make any practical difference: ‘I saw all of the people around me living as if there was no God...it wasn’t really meaningful to anybody...That’s where I kind of decided that I didn’t believe it and there was really no need for me to really think about it.’ (Jason)

Christians could not provide good answers to questions: ‘[they said] ‘You don’t want to come up with these reasons. Faith, you just completely believe what you’re told.’ But they were saying it in a positive way, like it was a good thing...’; ‘...when I became a teenager, I began to question and began seeking out answers to more difficult questions, the answers weren’t really there. And, like I said, we were going here and there to church. And, they didn’t give very compelling answers to any of the questions that I would ask. So, I guess that’s what really led me to question whether it was true or not.’; ‘I debated these issues with Christians I knew, but their answers were all terrible...I would say most Christians I had met before college were ignorant and incapable of answering any questions in a reasonable way about their faith, or just never asked questions about Atheism in a thoughtful way.’ (Amanda) (Christopher) (Ashley)

Pain/suffering in the world: ‘As I got older, my parents were alcoholics and a lot of my friends’ parents were divorced or had rough relationships and I think as I got older, too, I just saw a lot of pain that people went through and just all of the pain and suffering in the world drew me away from belief in God more than anything...Overall, it was just the problem of evil, I guess and then I just, you know, ‘Where is this God you are talking about?’ Kind of a hiddenness sort of thing.’ (Matthew)

402 ‘Changing Intellectual Sense-making’ CATALYST Narrative Themes:

Intellectual quest: ‘I needed answers. I was not getting them from anybody. I ended up getting them by myself, and that was a gruesome process.... The first and most important point that finally clicked for me was the fact that I was not in control of the universe, the world, of others, or even entirely of my own life. Something much bigger than me must have its hands on everything.’; ‘So, I thought I would check this out and make sure that this is not true...Go where the evidence leads.’; ‘I got a book. It was basically the idea of God creating the universe and it talked about some of the science and it talked about God and it talked about the challenge of ‘Where does the Big Bang come from?’; ‘...I discovered podcasts and I started to listen to different podcasts, debates and other things like that.’; ‘I began to realize that there was this whole history of intellectual Christian thinkers.’; ‘[my Christian friend and I] were together every single day. Every single day we were reading books.’; ‘He sent me a book about Jesus’s resurrection. That’s where I was convinced after reading that book... I did not even finish the book. After getting part way through and reading about the historical evidence behind it about the resurrection, the culture Jesus grew up in, and how NT Wright lays down the argument that is basically indisputable. I mean, it is something I can’t really explain, but all of a sudden, I had an immediate mind switch. I thought ‘Wow, I believe in this stuff.’ That is kind of where it happened.’; ‘I guess the game changer was reading Lee Strobel’s *Case for Christ*. It opened up different streams of evidence to be thinking about. By the time I finished that book, I was thinking that there are potentially good answers out here. I’m interested in pursuing this more.’; ‘During that time, I started reading *The Case for Christ* and stuff... I have always wanted to know both sides of everything...I got that one and also *The Reason for God* later. So, I read that book and started feeling like, ‘Alright, maybe. What if people just have it all wrong? What if people have been teaching it wrong? That this is real?’... I wasn’t sleeping because I was reading so many books and I was watching so many messages. I was Googling all this stuff about my questions. I bought a Bible on Amazon.com, the cheapest one I could

find, and started reading that. My goal was really to put to rest once and for all the question of Christianity being a valid approach to knowing God, and then to go from there to figuring out the existence of God in general. Instead, I started learning that the Bible isn't a book of stories and rules, and that there are other historical sources to look at regarding who Jesus was.'; 'I was so obsessed. It really shifted from an interesting philosophical exercise to this is the kind of stuff that kept me awake at night because I wanted to know, I want to know. Is God really there? I want to know. And, that really takes it to a whole another level of passion, I guess.'; 'Initially I just read as much as I could. Initially, I remember an argument about the probability of life existing on earth and so originally, I was just trying to read all of the papers that I could, trying to figure out how they got all of those numbers. I did it on my own. I don't think I talked to anybody.' (Sean) (Kyle) (Jason) (Ryan) (Jennifer) (Amanda) (Nicholas) (Christopher) (Jessica) (Jeremy) (Heather)

Cognitive dissonance caused questioning: 'I developed this strong sense of right or wrong, but I also knew that there was no ontological basis for it.' 'He [an Atheist friend] admitted actually that morality was an illusion and said, 'I don't care, I will go with the illusion.'; 'I'm studying evolution and then I want to be a doctor and yet medicine is intended to prolong people's lives but probably part of their problems are genetically based... And then I started having this weird crisis with that.' 'If there is just no purpose to life, then you can do whatever you want, and it feels good for a while, but it is ultimately really unsatisfying... I started thinking about death, and if there is something out there beyond this life then I better know about it. I really don't think that there is. I would say I almost wanted there to be something at that time just to make sense of it all, but I was very, very skeptical that it could even be possible, or even be there, that there was anything to it. There was a point where I wanted it to be true, but I was skeptical that it could be true.' 'if you do take Atheism to its logical conclusion. Then there is no such thing as morals anymore. There is no such thing as right or wrong. A purposeful life, it doesn't mean anything. It was something that I soberly recognized and marched on. But that is what caused me to go to my uncle who has a PhD in theology from Oxford University. I basically asked him, I've got to know actual, historical, objective evidence for Christianity.'; 'During this time, I was strongly searching for answers to the question of moral grounding and objective value. Atheism provided unsatisfying and hopelessly contradictory answers, which is one of the reasons I became open to various forms of spirituality.' 'I was really struggling by sophomore year with, 'Okay, I really don't believe in God. How do I know what is right and wrong? How do I construct a morality?'...How do I make sense of the world? I was really wrestling with it.' And then I thought, what an outrageously bonkers thing to actually, when I actually realized how could someone so smart, this was such a foolish thing to believe in is that I am going to make truth claims day in and day out and claim that the truth does not exist. That for me was, well, duh, light bulb moment. How could I miss something so fundamental?' 'That got me into the whole issue of 'What is truth?'... 'I found his [Plantinga's] argument against rationality from a naturalist point of view completely and totally overwhelming. Because if I even wanted to pretend to be a naturalist I had to concede when hundred percent that I am not thinking, that I am not acting. That to me just did not mesh with reality.'; 'I had been influenced by CS Lewis, so I had the moral argument version of it...it bothered my conscience. I was ignoring that. The thing that really bothered me was, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' That was the main thing that got me. But that was not enough to convert me. That wasn't enough for me.' (Joseph) (Kyle) (Amanda) (Matthew) (Nicholas) (Christopher) (Ashley) (Jeremy) (Melissa)

Interaction with informed Christians: 'I was spending so much time listening to Christians talk about certain things I would ask him questions about what they believed...So sometimes I would have a conversation with someone about something that would provoke some thoughts later on, like Huh, that's something to consider.' So, it was through those interactions that I started to rethink my own position.'; 'I met Christians whose lives were existentially attractive; decided to reconsider Christianity 'in the name of epistemic humility'; 'one of the things that open the door for me was he first asked me, 'Who is Jesus to you?' I had never thought of that question...So there is a part of me that like, 'I can't answer that.' There was an academic part of me that was like, 'Maybe I should look into this. It is one of the largest questions that there are in life.'; 'I was completely stunned. I mean, I really did not think they existed. I totally did not believe that there was anybody like that. I didn't believe that intelligent people believe in traditional, orthodox Christianity.'; 'They were saying stuff and connecting the dots. They gave answers.'; 'So, I think there were definitely strong arguments that I had and what it really took for me to become a Christian was for those arguments to be dismantled and for me to find arguments for the other side.'; 'So about six months into studying philosophy with a philosopher I started to realize, even my concept of nihilism are completely backwards. I had no coherent worldview.'; I said I was agnostic. I don't think there is a God. I remember I specifically told him, 'I don't want to argue about it. I don't want to convince you. I don't need you to convince me. We can just try to learn from each other. But then along the way, because all of his arguments ended with, 'Okay, then there is a God.' (Ryan) (Anthony) (Jennifer) (Amanda) (John) (Ashley) (Jeremy) (Heather)

Embodied Christianity 'made sense': 'I had not been doing a lot of intellectual thinking about religion and faith. But I was certainly open to the prospect that there was more to life and I believed, the Christians were showing me a world that had meaning, that had a moral compass, that made sense.'; 'Christianity best explains the condition of my heart and my character and my needs and who I was as a sinful person and what I needed from God.' (Joseph) (Jason)

Cultural religious caricatures dismantled: 'The biggest thing is that my cultural caricatures of Christians were broken down. And that everything that I was told about religion and that religion was a lie, that I was told that these people are stupid, ignorant, superstitious.'; 'I began to realize that there is a great, tremendous intellectual history to the Christianity, too. These people aren't crazy.' 'When you read Bonhoeffer or you read the church fathers, these are intelligent people. There are people who have their heads on, and they actually believe this.'; '...that was broken down just like my assumptions that Christians were not educated, that they are not informed, so that was another barrier. Because when you think that way, before you even speak anything, you've already dismissed them.' (Joseph) (Jennifer) (Amanda)

Comparing Christianity to other religions: ‘learning about these other religions convinced me that they are not right, they are not true, which solidified my view that Christianity is true and that it best explains the world that we live in.’; They didn’t seem substantive at all. They seemed shallow, particularly Buddhism and New Age seemed really soft and unthoughtful. And, they seemed to not have better answers to some of the moral questions.’; ‘The summer between my sophomore and junior years I decided to disprove every major world religion... That’s what got me into Christianity. Still, I approached it first as, ‘How can I dismantle this? How can I show that it isn’t true? That it doesn’t match with reality?’ (Jason) (Christopher) (Jeremy)

Commitment to truth: ‘It was a gruesome process. It was hard. As a prideful person who liked to argue and be right about everything, one day finding out that you are wrong about everything, that’s tragic...like PTSD...it was traumatic’; ‘I guess what broke me down was just realizing that I had a lot of assumptions that I didn’t notice and that I had been so arrogant about and conceited that I was being so rational and I was being so smart about anything. And then seeing all of these mistakes and errors in my thinking. I would say I had a willingness to accept that I was wrong, that... So, I would say at bottom I had a commitment to truth... I wanted to believe what was true. And so, when it became clear that I was in error, I accepted it. It was humbling and unpleasant, but I would still accept it.’; ‘And so there was a shift subtly there from ‘I am going to disprove Christianity’ to saying, ‘I want to know if it is actually true.’ And so, that was of fundamental importance, you get this commitment to truth. I want to know what reality actually is. Really that process it took almost 18 months or so of painstaking research.’ (Sean) (Amanda) (Jeremy)

Disappointment with Atheist arguments: ‘You want the Atheist to rise to the standard that the Christians are setting, and they weren’t.’; ‘And I realized, like, how can I miss that? It was part of ‘your teachers are the informed ones, and this is what they are telling you and you are pretty much brought up to believe what your teachers tell you, and it is faith, but you don’t realize it.’ (Kyle) (Amanda); **Doubting Atheism:** ‘I started having this notion that maybe, just maybe this whole concept of the universe coming into existence out of nothing really doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. I mean, how do you get something from nothing? It’s typically untenable.’ ‘That was big too, just intelligent design and thinking about the flaws in evolution.’ (Jason) (Amanda); **Reading New Atheists led to Christian writings:** ‘Through the New Atheists, however, I eventually found the stronger Christian apologists... the intellectual arguments were shifting my rational beliefs.’ (Kyle)

Following the evidence/Christianity intellectually ‘made sense’: ‘I would say that it is not like I was looking for the evidence, but I would say that I had my mind open to follow the evidence wherever the evidence could lead. So, in other words, it was not like I was looking for that answer, but I wasn’t going to read it and be totally skeptical of what I was finding there.’; ‘[Christianity] did lead intellectually into some sense of coherence. It means I now had an ontological grounding for morality...the idea that right and wrong was grounded in a transcendent reality, that simply provided a compass. That was intellectually very attractive as well. Christianity best explains the world that we live in.’ (Nicholas) (Joseph)

Attended church, bible study: ‘Some asked me to different Bible studies. I was like, ‘Wow I really need to learn all of this stuff.’; ‘this discipling Bible study might be a good place because a lot of questions are answered about the Bible, whether or not to believe it, who is Jesus?’ I wasn’t a Christian, but I had this general believing.’ (Barbara) (Jason) (Paul)

Context/Life change where change of thinking encouraged: After moving to another state, she became open to ‘new kinds of thinking’: ‘When people are in new situations, they are more open to new kinds of thinking.’; ‘I finally got to England and had the time to read... And I had this culture of contemplation.’ (Barbara) (Jennifer)

Impressed by beauty in creation, in literature, music: ‘I don’t remember what the catalyst was. It was just looking at the beauty of the park and thinking about the whole creation of the universe and all of these things that I said, ‘You know, maybe there is a God.’; ‘But at the same time, my college years was the time when I got one of the most important seeds that was planted. And that was that I encountered Christian poetry for the very first time. I was tremendously moved by it. It just knocked me out. I loved it...But at the time, I didn’t have a way to connect my response to anything else. And so, it went nowhere. It was a seed that was planted, a rather important one. I had no framework to even see how this connected to anything else and so I just went forward.’ ‘The first response I had to Christianity was positive. It was yes, this is beautiful, this is true. I didn’t know what I was responding to. And the more I became convinced intellectually that Atheism was true based on shallow stupid arguments, but never mind, it was a huge disconnect. It is exactly what CS Lewis talks about when he talks about is divided hemispheres. ‘Everything I believe to be true I find ugly and meaningless. Everything I found meaningful and beautiful was not true.’ This was me, right?’; And so, I started to get haunted, particularly by beauty. I would sit there on these evenings and wax eloquent. Beauty doesn’t exist or morality doesn’t exist, and I would still be walking out and seeing the sunset and it would just strike me. That was kind of the golden thread that for me was just such an authentic experience. It was undeniable and self-evident that there was some sort of sense of beauty that really resonates. Why did it do that? And so, we ended up studying aesthetics which is very quickly showed me there was something here much bigger than myself... ‘why am I so strung out on how beautiful Mozart is?’ And I started seeing, wait, there is something bigger going here.’ (Jason) (Michelle) (Jeremy)

⁴⁰³ ‘New Intellectual Sense-making’ CONVERSION Narrative Themes:

Finding intellectual answers in Christianity: ‘I had all of my hard questions answered. I had all of my skeptical Atheistic questions answered.’ ‘I was looking for the answers. I wanted to be convinced but not to the point that I would say that I am going to ignore inconsistencies, or I am going to ignore things that I disbelieve. I didn’t want to be convinced that badly.’; ‘the shift occurred from ‘Okay I’ve put this back on the table, I am intrigued by it,’ to a place when I went ‘Whoa, this is actually intellectually defensible in an objective way’.’; ‘So, once you’ve got that data, you can say they are confused or

they're idiots or they are wrong, but that would be based upon prejudice because I had no evidence. So, it was really dealing with the data they shared and trying to process that.'; 'Well, I was like, 'He's really talking about a historical event here...He's talking about something very real and physical.' That was really challenging to me. And so, I was like, 'Well, if Christ is resurrected, then it is obviously true.'; 'I mean by that point I was like, 'Okay I'm in this, I looked through this and Christianity is offering the only answers that are even close to coherent.'; All of the sudden, the arguments were starting to click. But all of the emotions I had felt were totally gone. I did not know what to do about it... That, if my head really thought this was true then my heart would follow again later. It was at that point that I decided that I should get baptized. I was ready to commit.'; 'Well initially, again, it was an intellectual thing initially, like, 'Oh, what does that mean for my life? What does that mean?'... You know there was probably six months like that and then there were some additional questions that I had to move from 'Is there a God?' to the Christian God. I knew I had other questions before I could say, 'I believe that is true.' And then finally I would say a year and a half ago I started calling myself a Christian.' (Sean) (Jason) (Anthony) (John) (Matthew) (Christopher) (Ashley) (Heather)

Continuing skepticism: 'I wasn't 100, it didn't engender in me 100% psychological certainty but felt like there was enough to go on, to think that it was objectively true, yeah.'; 'For the first time I felt like it was acceptable for me to not be sure about the creation story or the Bible being literal and inerrant, and I could still seek and even become a legitimate Christ follower.'; 'If you wait to a point where you are absolutely certain, you are never going to know anything ever. You're never going to make any progress forward.' What dawned on me was, in a worst-case scenario further on down the road, if I find something that discredits it, and I just go back on the hunt. Not a big deal. (Anthony) (Jessica) (Jeremy)

Resistance to conversion: 'Even when I got to that point. 'Sorry, God or whoever you are, I can't believe.' And that was even addressed. And so, there was nowhere to hide. But I also knew that there was in spite of me, I believed that I needed to believe. And that was sort of the tipping point.'; 'I met people who embraced their own humanity; free thinkers who arrived at conclusions through searching and questioning, not blind acceptance. The more I resisted my changing thoughts about faith, the more I felt God's presence. It was gradual, but I was convinced of who God is and who Jesus is. The clincher was realizing that God is God and my relationship to him is about him, not me - which was deep and profound enough to convince me.' (Jennifer) (Jessica). **Conversion as more than intellectual answers:** 'I was converted while gaining an understanding about the actual issues.' Ryan describes his conversion associated with gaining understanding about actual issues, but also contends that arguments/evidence would not have made any difference without God opening him towards believing that He was real and true. 'You can get to a point of intellectual acceptance that there is still the step of the will. And you have to make that step. You have to do something... And I knew, I recognized consciously that there was this disconnect between reason and the rest of me.' (Ryan) (Michelle)

Long process of coming to believe Christianity as true: 'it was a very long process, and it was a process that doubt in a way fueled my desire to look for evidence.' (Jason)

Ease in believing Christianity: 'I think it happened fairly instantaneously. It came down to, 'Look, if there is a God, if this is how he interacts in the world, if Scripture is a witness to him, then that's it. It's all in it for the money.' I didn't adopt it in sort of a piece meal fashion.'

Frustration at lack of earlier exposure to the credibility of the Christian worldview: 'It was almost a little disappointing that my education in a secular school was just so ignorant been so lacking in education about what Christians actually believe on anything substantive.' (Anthony)

⁴⁰⁴ 'New Intellectual Sense-making' POST-CONVERSION Narrative Themes:

Difficulty in changing to and embodying new beliefs: 'So that was hard, having to re-wire my entire brain, thinking, everything, and just come to a completely new understanding of my entire life.' 'It is a tumultuous thing to change your entire worldview. It's like stepping into another world because the way that you perceive everything changes. So, I understand why people are reluctant about wanting to switch their worldview one way or the other. If you go from believing that there's no objective moral duties to believing that there are these duties binding upon you then that's an enormous shift in the way that you think about everything you do or say or think. To go in another direction, I understand that people are cautious about even consider something that might potentially change their life that much.'; 'And then I just started, my thinking shifted, everything shifted, my perspective, everything. But it wasn't overnight. It wasn't a joyful thing. I think part of that is that my circumstances were difficult at the time. Part of it was just was that it was very sobering. This is huge. But it had to be that for me to buy into it.'; 'It was a complete change of worldviews. It was going from Atheism to Christianity. It was like ripping your whole world view away from you. I did not let go of that easily. It was too weird for me to acknowledge it that easily. So, I think I was just too stubborn I guess.' (Sean) (Christopher) (Jessica) (Melissa)

Developed a 'thinking faith': 'I started to have a thinking faith...began to get interested in apologetics.' 'My thinking actually changed a lot. I actually got interested in philosophy [and apologetics]; 'it is a commitment in my life to understand what I believe. And I view it as a lifelong commitment.'; 'I am a very pragmatic, practical kind of guy, so what I started doing, maybe not doing the research on my own.'; 'I got into not just reading and studying the word, but I think up Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*...And I still do stuff like that. I am reading Dr. Craig's *Reasonable Faith* right now. And I am hosting a Bible study based on Dr. Craig's *On Guard*...I believe every Christian should know why they believe what they believe.' 'After Jesus made himself real to me [through a spiritual experience], I decided I wanted to actually look into the evidence, rather than chant the mantra still heard from Atheists today, that 'there is no evidence'. I've

been involved in apologetics ever since...I wanted it to be something that I was intellectually grasping. So, I just started researching it.' (Joseph) (Kyle) (Jason) (Paul) (David) (Melissa)

Believes God is real, Christianity is true and rational: 'I believe there is a God who really is there. It is not simply using mythical language for moral lexicon. And so, I would say everything I believe is ontologically based, not simply socially or relationally useful.'; 'there is actually a rational element to the gospel. If you just think on a very objective level. Why didn't anyone just say that to me so that I could at least think it through? How can you dismiss so much of this worldview that has contributed to the classics and things that you've studied to your own thinking process?'; After I converted, I wrote a long explanation of why I had converted that covered the philosophical, rational reasons, and it also contains the personal element of what I had been experiencing and feeling. It ended up being 23 pages.' (Joseph) (Jennifer) (Ashley)

Formal university and/or post-graduate education in theology, philosophy, apologetics: (Joseph) (Jason) (Ryan) (Anthony)

Counters 'anti-intellectual' Christian stereotypes: 'it is very easy to place Christians inside a simplistic box, labelling them as 'ignorant' or 'bigots' etc. Anything which gently challenges that kind of categorization is very inconvenient for them.'; 'There is so much misinformation and so many people rejecting Christ because of what man does to misrepresent him.' (Kyle) (Paul) Here Paul expresses his elevated view of truth within the Christian worldview as something 'ultimately freeing'; and, he is disturbed by the truth of Christianity being misrepresented.

Bible reading/study: 'We went to some local Bible studies...I was involved in that for several years. There was a real grounding in the word.' (Barbara)

Works/volunteers in Christian apologetics: (Sean) (Joseph) (Kyle) (Jason) (Richard)

Views Christianity as a coherent, comprehensive worldview: 'Christianity...is intellectually satisfying because it gives you a philosophical, moral, pragmatic worldview that you can wrestle with in order to discover who you are and what your place in the world is.'; 'And, now I think I see the world really clearly. I think I see the worldview thing really, really well now. But before, I couldn't see it. I couldn't see it at all.' Christianity is an entire worldview. It's not Sunday. It's everything. It's the whole package.'; 'You actually have the thing that completely meshes with reality. And that changes your perspective on how you interact with people.' (Kyle) (Richard) (Jeremy)

Continuing skepticism: 'I don't know that I would ever feel comfortable saying that I am 100% sure. There is part of me that says that I don't know that I could be that person. And so, I just keep looking.'; 'Now, the skeptical side of that really kicked for me later in a sense because people put me on trial. But by that time, it was like you had met God, so you had the encounter as the basis and then the factual you do almost reverse engineering – trying to find the information to fill in the experience that you had to back it up.'; 'Even now I will hear something and question it and I will keep a list and ask him, 'What do you know about this? It confuses me.' And he is able to help me through a lot of those things and direct me to resources as well. Even if I sensed that there was a God, I would struggle with that a lot if I wasn't able to go through some intellectual argument for it as well because I would fight against myself I am sure. I think that for me personally, again and I have thought about it so much, that I have to go with looking at all of the evidence, both the arguments and the personal feelings. If I have to say, 'What do I believe? What do I personally believe?' Then, I am convinced that it is true, but it doesn't mean that I am certain. I would not reject the possibility that there could be, maybe I am fooling myself, that it is an elaborate social construct. I don't know if it is possible to show that that is not possible. But in the end, we all have to go with what we think are true, what we are personally convinced is the truth.' (Jason) (John) (Heather)

Once compelling Atheist arguments are weaker than once thought: And reading back on it now, years later, I was like, Russell sucked! What an idiot! But I really don't know how to explain that...Maybe now I just have a better shape of the context of those debates to recognize that certain points are serious; whereas before, I just didn't see it.' (Anthony)

Embodying an informed Christian belief: '[Atheists] need to encounter Christians who can really step into that way of thinking and provide them with some key evidences here and there that show that Christianity tracks reality at critical junctures. Reliance and personal testimonies, experiences and feelings of meaning/beauty etc. will have little sway. Christians who can talk philosophy and science are needed.' (Anthony)

Table 86. Intellectual Sense-Making shift: ‘Cognitive Dissonance’ to ‘Resolution’

Intellectual Sense-Making BR Shift	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative ‘Cognitive Dissonance’ to	Post-Conversion Metanarrative ‘Resolution’
<p>Intellectual Sense-Making Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #20 Joseph</p>	<p>Atheist: As a child Joseph occasionally considered the possibility of God’s existence, but grew up thinking religious belief was inferior and unwarranted: ‘<i>I grew up thinking that religious is stupid, for the weak. It is something innately inherited from my mother, and possibly the idea, I think a bit of a superiority complex, that Atheists are intellectually superior to believers. So, you know, that kind of thing. I guess as a child from time to time I thought there must be some kind of god or something. But that was kind of rationalized away to some degree.</i>’</p> <p>He realized, however, his strong sense of objective morality was not warranted within an Atheist worldview, causing cognitive ‘tension’: ‘<i>I have to say one other thing that did baffle me was, I had a strong sense of right and wrong. The other thing I have to say is my family was very dysfunctional and spasmodically abusive. My stepfather developed a gambling problem. My mother developed a drinking problem. And I really began to resent my parents for their stupidity and their irresponsibility. That had a big formative element on me, and very much, ‘This is the right thing to do. This is the right thing come hell or high water.’ And so very much that way.</i></p> <p><i>So, I developed this strong sense of right or wrong, but I also knew that there was no ontological basis for it, that ultimately whether you help an old lady across the road or whether you push for in front of the truck, it is ultimately morally meaningless. You can ascribe right and wrong to it, but ultimately it has no basis. If we are all evolved animals, then there is nothing wrong with just behaving like animals in the technical sense. So that’s what I sensed the worldview meant, you know, that might makes right. It just comes down to power. And yet, I have a strong sense of what ought not be. But I never reconciled that in my own mind. And said that was a tension I lived with for a while. That’s probably the extent of it in terms of reflecting on worldview.’</i></p>	<p>Catalyst (cont.) Joseph’s cognitive tension was resolved within Christianity: ‘<i>Yeah, I think it would be fair to say. The biggest thing is that my cultural caricatures of Christians were broken down. And that everything that I was told about religion and that religion was a lie, that I was told that these people are stupid, ignorant, superstitious. But the other thing was, it did lead intellectually into some sense of coherence. It means I now had an ontological grounding for morality...the idea that right and wrong was grounded in a transcendent reality, that simply provided a compass. That was intellectually very attractive as well.</i></p> <p>Conversion: Belief in God for Joseph happened ‘fairly instantaneously’ based upon his belief in God’s existence and scripture: [Christian belief] ‘<i>I think it happened fairly instantaneously. It came down to, ‘Look, if there is a God, if this is how he interacts in the world, if Scripture is a witness to him, then that’s it. It’s all in it for the money.’ I didn’t adopt it in sort of a piece meal fashion. I think I pretty much bought the whole store as far as I could tell. That there was no gradual intellectual creeping, of things gradually being absorbed. I went straight into it.</i></p> <p>Post-Conversion: Joseph developed ‘a thinking faith’: After conversion, Joseph ‘<i>began to get interested in apologetics. I came across a guy, William Lane Craig. He is a big-name philosopher apologist and I really loved his stuff.</i>’ ‘<i>That is when I started to have a thinking faith.</i>’</p> <p><i>‘And then I thought about leaving the army to go to theological studies actually in view of becoming an Army chaplain. But once I get my studies it became clear that I was probably more gifted on the academic side of things.’</i></p> <p>It also provides, I think Christianity provides intellectual play dough. It provides something to get your mind around and to enjoy comprehending. So, <i>it is intellectually satisfying because it gives you a philosophical, moral, pragmatic</i></p>

	<p>'I still liked a certain sense of chivalry, that there are <i>certain things young man shouldn't do</i>. Even when I joined the Army, there were certain things my Army friends were doing that I thought were just wrong, you know, seducing young girls at any expense was one of them. That kind of a thing, <i>'I thought I just can't do that. That ain't right.'</i> It was a bit like that. There was a certain degree of liberality, but with <i>moral absolutes in there somewhere but no reason for having them.'</i></p> <p>Catalyst: Through associating with Christians, Joseph began to see a world that 'made sense' to him, that the lies he had been told about religion were exposed, and it was 'intellectually satisfying': 'At that point I had not been doing a lot of intellectual thinking about religion and faith. But I was certainly open to the prospect that there was more to life and I believed, the Christians were showing me a world that had meaning, that had a moral compass, that made sense. And there was also an experiential element.'</p>	<p><i>worldview that you can wrestle with in order to discover who you are and what your place in the world is. And so, it is not just kind of do as you like – eat sleep drink die and then that's it. It provides something to think about and to internalize as you are living your life. And I think that is actually one of the attractions. Like I said it is intellectual play dough. It gets you something to use to put your mind into as you are living your life. And that is something that became very attractive to me.'</i></p> <p>Joseph believes in 'a God who is really there' - not merely the social benefits of belonging: <i>I believe there is a God who really is there. It is not simply using mythical language for moral lexicon. It's not simply creating a social setting that is conducive for middle-class families. I see myself as part of a story and part of God's story. And so, I would say everything I believe is ontologically based, not simply socially or relationally useful.</i></p>
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Table 87. Intellectual Sense-Making shift: 'Uninformed' to 'Informed'

Intellectual Sense-Making BR Shift	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative	Post-Conversion Metanarrative
	'Uninformed' to	'Informed'
Intellectual Sense-Making Biographical Reconstruction F2 #25 Kyle⁴⁰⁵	<p>Atheism: Kyle lost his nominal Christian faith at University due to its loss of plausibility and attraction: 'So I had some Christian faith and teenage years but when I got to university that did not survive at all. Because going to university, that is when you <i>get bombarded with all kinds of alternative ideas</i>, you are out there on your own...<i>Christianity just didn't make sense anymore</i> but also resisting it, not wanting it to be true anymore as well. It was both genuine doubts, and well I don't want it anyhow. I think both of those needed addressing, sort of breaking down.'</p>	<p>Kyle investigated both Atheism and Christianity: 'Because the same way that I had just dropped Christianity I had not investigated Atheism properly either. <i>So, I was both looking into Christianity but also looking into Atheism</i> and figuring what that would actually be if I really did that.'</p> <p>Although Kyle still wanted Atheism to be true, he could not ignore the evidence he was finding in Christianity: 'It was about two years afterwards during William Lane Craig's 2012 speaking tour, yeah, because I was actually helping out with that, making some of the viral videos of the empty chair and trying to give Dawkins a nudge in the</p>

⁴⁰⁵ Kyle had 'sincere doubts' as to the truth of God and Christianity as an Atheist. However, through examining both Atheist and Christian worldviews, he found more substance on the side of Christianity, that it was 'worth' believing. He moved from 'trust' in Atheism as intellectually superior to Christianity to becoming convinced that the Christian worldview had the best explanation for reality as evidenced in and through Christian scholarship.

	<p>'My faith gradually disappeared to the point where I could no longer self-describe as Christian...I got into the <i>New Atheists' writings and speaking, and their view seemed far more attractive and plausible</i> over Christian views.'</p> <p>Through the Atheists, naturalism is portrayed as intellectually credible and beautiful, Christianity as anti-intellectual and boring: 'And even having a more superficial understanding of the relationship between evolution and Christianity, at the time it was very easy to, I'm pretty persuaded that this is one of the more tactical victories or clever things that the New Atheists achieved. Because what <i>they basically done, people like Dawkins, is that they've made a study of the natural world and naturalism and the study of our evolutionary history. They've made that the beautiful thing. And they managed to characterize things like Christianity as being the boring, really simplistic, anti-intellectual thing...</i>One of the achievements that people like Dawkins have done is that they have really been able to communicate an intricate beauty about the natural world. Look at all of these intricate ways in which things grow and change. And then <i>they hold up the stereotype of Christianity that says 'Oh, God made it, just like snapping his finger and magically these creatures appear.'</i> And that is boring, frankly, the way it is portrayed. It is boring. And it seems anti-intellectual. That is the starting point. That is what gives Atheism all of its credibility in that context. And, it really does take that kind of strong apologetic, at least in my case it did, to come along and challenge it.'</p> <p>[Were there any particular issues that caused more doubt than others?]</p> <p>'Intuitively, the idea of there being <i>life after death just seemed ridiculous</i> at the time because I had gotten used to a very naturalistic way of thinking about things. You just focus on the physical world right here as the way things are. The idea of there being in <i>heaven was just cartoonish and silly</i> I would feel like a bit of an idiot to try and picture the thing in my head. I would think no one actually believes that. So there were a lot of assumptions there.</p>	<p>ribs - basically giving the message that 'I am disappointed with you. Come on, defend this message of Atheism that I would still quite like to be true!' Yes, I was disappointed.</p> <p>By this time, I considered myself agnostic. I was disappointed because I had put my confidence in him. <i>I wanted this God stuff to be false...But then again, when you've learned these things about how an argument works, how to actually study evidence, and finding this whole field of philosophy in academic study fascinating, you can't ignore that.</i> If there is a certain criterion and a type of integrity that is needed in order to put your argument across then you can't go back on that. <i>You want the Atheist to rise to the standard that the Christians are setting, and they weren't.'</i></p> <p>Kyle began to see inconsistencies in the Atheist argument for morality, causing him disconcertion: 'But of course having absorbed all of the logical, analytical stuff from Bill Craig and all of these other people, I pointed out, but surely that is an incoherent statement because if morality is a product of evolution and a mistake, well, how can you call it a blessed mistake? Because if you aren't calling it a blessed mistake, then you are you using an outside criterion to judge that thing which is a product a mistake. And this really surprised me. We really got to the point, and we have been talking about the laws of non-contradiction as well as other things. But at that moment, he really got fed up and said, 'I don't care. I don't care. Alright, it is a contradiction. I don't care' He admitted actually that morality was an illusion and said, 'I don't care, I will go with the illusion.'</p> <p>My jaw just dropped, and I thought 'Well, wait a minute! You are the person who at University, you were demanding this stuff and saying how bad it is for people to believe in delusory things, saying 'You shouldn't believe in God because it is a delusion. Now you were telling me that moral truth is a delusion and you are throwing in with just being deluded?' So that was bizarre. <i>That was really strange. I can only think that that was his inner life showing where, you know I'm sure in my</i></p>
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	<p>Obviously, <i>you don't get resurrection. Obviously, you don't get this.'</i></p> <p>Catalyst: Kyle began studying Christian apologetics because he wanted to make sure Christianity wasn't true before he rejected it: 'One of the odd reasons that I think why I ended up exploring the apologetics so much and reading so much is because <i>I wanted to make sure that it wasn't true</i> because I had heard people say, 'Well, actually that there is a good amount of historical evidence for this,' that sort of thing which is odd, really. I'm not sure why I went to that. I think that was part of it; and, actually <i>I think part of it was trying to follow Dawkins' example because he was saying, 'Go where the evidence leads.'</i> And it seemed really blatant at the time that clearly if I do follow the evidence that I will find out even more strongly that Christianity is a load of nonsense, and it is not true. So, <i>I thought I would check this out and make sure that this is not true</i> and yeah, it was surprising.'</p> <p>Kyle became aware of the strength of Christian intellectual arguments and a perceived lack of Atheistic response to Christian scholarship: 'Because up until then, <i>I thought, 'Clearly the Atheists have the easy ride and all the answers, and all these dumb Christians need to defend themselves and these seemingly crazy beliefs.'</i> But actually, curiously enough, when you do really listen to Bill Craig's stuff after a while, you start to figure out how logic works, how to analyze arguments, <i>you hear it from the perspective of actual Christian scholarship, and gradually the burden shifts to the point where now these Christian academics seem to be saying some rather sophisticated things here. What do you Atheists have to</i></p>	<p><i>own way it wasn't just intellectual stuff. There were others personal things underneath.</i> But I was quite astonished that he would be that overt about saying, 'I don't care about the logic.'" ⁴⁰⁶</p> <p>Conversion: When Kyle understood that Christianity is not only true but requires 'everything', he began to think differently about it: 'I had a good little talk with Jan actually evenings before, because I told her where I was, and that Bill's stuff looks incredibly persuasive and I'm very disappointed with the New Atheists and I'm not really sure where I am right now. I think in a way it is quite nice idea that intellectually Bill prepares me for this for four years and then his wife just gives me a nudge at the end. But what she basically said, she said, '<i>Look, if you don't think you can give everything over to Jesus, don't do it. Don't become a Christian. If you can't give everything to him, because that is what it's all about.</i>'</p> <p>And that was actually quite surprising because I have been very used to people being just desperate to convert people, saying, 'Come and join us quickly, quickly!' And that kind of thing. Whereas, she actually said, '<i>This is what it's all about, so if you can do that then don't do it!</i>' So that was a slightly different way of thinking about it.' ⁴⁰⁷</p> <p>Post-Conversion: Since becoming a Christian, Kyle's 'thinking' has changed: [How did your life change since accepting Christ?] '<i>My thinking actually changed a lot. I actually got interested in philosophy, for example. My thinking had been totally changed and I started learning new stuff even before becoming a Christian because of all of the apologetics material.</i>'</p>
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⁴⁰⁶ This is an interesting conversation with an Atheist friend with whom he had been discussing intellectual issues. When the Atheist argument seemed incoherent, Kyle observes that the Atheist was motivated for personal rather than logical, rational reasons. This was a pivotal moment of insight, of moving away from Atheism and towards the coherence of theism.

⁴⁰⁷ This dialogue between Kyle and a Christian about conversion was insightful – not only to him as potentially becoming a Christian, but also to me as an observer. The idea that conversion 'requires everything' would make it more rather than less attractive despite its demands made Christianity somehow more worthy (rather than less worthy) of belief. It makes me consider that sometimes Christianity is guilty of making belief 'too easy' and not worth believing because the cost is too low. Alternatively, when the cost is high, somehow it becomes worth more, worth giving all, more attractive as it did for Kyle.

	<p><i>say about this? And so, the pressure almost shifts back onto them. Okay you've given him this challenge for evidence, but they are actually presenting some troublingly sophisticated sounding stuff here. I still resisted it a long time. I said, 'What do you have to say in return?'</i></p> <p><i>'Through the New Atheists, however, I eventually found the stronger Christian apologists, and they raised my awareness and standards for logical argumentation. I was annoyed that Dawkins persistently refused to debate William Lane Craig, and this began to shift my sympathies, while the intellectual arguments were shifting my rational beliefs. I had both sincere doubts about Christianity, but also insincere objections because I didn't want it to be true.'</i></p>	
<p>Intellectual Sense-Making Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F2 #46 Jason⁴⁰⁸</p>	<p>Atheism: As an Atheist, he saw no need to seriously think about God's existence because faith did not seem to make any practical difference: 'And because I saw all of the people around me living as if there was no God, my parents were nominally religious in that we said our prayer at night, but it wasn't really meaningful to anybody. It is just what we did. That's where I kind of decided that I didn't believe it and <i>there was really no need for me to really think about it.</i>'</p> <p>He questioned whether or not Christians really believed their own faith: 'It was all nonsense. <i>And I didn't really think that most of them believed it. There may have been a handful of people that really believed I, but I don't think so.</i>'</p> <p>In retrospect, he admitted his Atheism was not well considered intellectually: 'I don't know that I thought that much about</p>	<p>Conversion: Jason describes a long process of conversion, of coming to believe in Christianity as true: 'Then over time as I continued to study, I was reading Evidence that Demands a Verdict on my own and I was reading the New Testament in this study and see the person of Jesus and that the film and old testament prophecies and see how that story as a whole ties together and how it makes sense as a big story. <i>In going through that process, I started to see, I really do think this is right. But probably it was another year before I think that I really came to a more convinced faith.</i></p> <p>Jason did not want to become a Christian if he still had considerable doubts, so he spent time studying and working through his questions. He wanted to be convinced it was true: '...it was a very long process, and it was a process that doubt in a way fueled my desire to look for evidence. And says that's when I think I became initially</p>

⁴⁰⁸ As an Atheist, Jason was admittedly uninformed as to the grounding of his worldview and rejection of Christianity without thoughtful consideration. (e.g., 'I kind of decided that I didn't believe (Christianity) and there was really no need for me to really think about it.') Rather he adopted Atheism as an identity, as permission to be autonomous rather than based upon intellectual premises. Once he began considering alternative religious worldviews, he intentionally pursued a best explanation of reality that grounded on justified reason and evidence. However, he continues to ground his view of reality with ongoing, life-long study and pursuit of truth.

As an Atheist, Jason did not seriously consider the intellectual grounding of Atheism until he became open to consider other perspectives. He then began to doubt the veracity of Atheism and its ability to substantially answer basic questions (e.g., origin of the universe); however, once he investigated the Christian worldview, his questions regarding basic reality were satisfied and came into harmony.

	<p>it at the time. So, <i>I had a lot of vague notions and feelings and general beliefs, but they weren't really founded.</i></p> <p>His Atheism was more an identity than a substantiated belief: <i>'I was not an analytical Atheist. I know far more now, even about the Atheist perspective and I knew then... It was just an identity.'</i></p> <p>He considered Christianity as an unscientific, man-made ideology unworthy of belief: <i>'But for me, God was a man-made construct and it was a mechanism for controlling people and it was a crutch for people that were weak and needed to believe in something and it was just unevolved thought that unscientific people had. And so I had these vague ideas, again, for me it wasn't as if I had this really deep understanding of scientific principles to say, 'Well, this is why we don't believe in God.' It was just sort of a generalized, 'Well, we know about evolution and we know about the formation of the universe' and all of these types of things. So, why do we need to even talk about God for?'</i></p> <p>Catalyst: Once he became open to considering the Christian worldview, he began to read, discuss, and seriously consider the tenability of the Atheistic worldview: <i>'I got a book, it was basically the idea of God creating the universe and it talked about some of the science and it talked about God and it talked about the challenge of where does the Big Bang come from. I just found it and bought it at the bookstore when I was browsing through books. Maybe I walked by it and it was on a main display or something. So, I bought it and I started reading it. At the same time, I started having deeper conversations with Greg. He and I started spending a lot more time talking.'</i></p> <p>He began to doubt some basic tenants held within the Atheistic worldview: <i>'And I started having this notion that maybe, just maybe this whole concept of the universe</i></p>	<p>interested in apologetics and such because I was looking for the answers. <i>I wanted to be convinced.</i> And maybe that is the transition of wanting to be convinced. Because before I was like, 'I'm not really sure about this.' But then when I found myself in that position when I said, 'Okay I am baptized now' then <i>I wanted to be convinced but not to the point that I would say that I am going to ignore inconsistencies, or I am going to ignore things that I disbelieve.</i> I didn't want to be convinced that badly. That was sort of the transition, doing the Bible study and seeing the person of Christ and the fulfillment of that was a major part.'⁴⁰⁹</p> <p>In his intellectual journey, he compared Christianity to other religious claims: I go and look at other religions because that has always been another question in my mind. How can one religion be true when there are all of these other religions out there? Why should we believe it? So, I have looked at other faiths.' '...and learning about these other religions convinced me that they are not right, they are not true, which solidified my view that Christianity is true and that it best explains the world that we live in. It best explains the condition of my heart and my character and my needs and who I was as a sinful person and what I needed from God. That's the only thing that explains that. But again, a long process.'</p> <p>Post-Conversion: After conversion, he remains committed towards understanding his own Christian worldview, considering it a lifelong journey along with the sobered realization that he will not find complete certainty:</p> <p><i>'And now I find myself, it is a commitment in my life to understand what I believe. And I view it as a lifelong commitment. I don't think there is at for a stopping point where you get there. I think our whole lives, we are going to be seeking after God and that</i></p>
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⁴⁰⁹ This is an important introspective comment – a point at which he realized he wanted to be convinced. His desire clearly played a role, his openness and willingness to intellectually believe.

	<p>coming into existence out of nothing <i>really doesn't make a whole lot of sense. I mean, how do you get something from nothing?</i> It's typically untenable.'</p> <p>In his investigation, he began reading a book given to him by a Christian friend to address his questions about the biblical text: 'At some point he gave me a copy of Evidence that Demands a Verdict and that's when I started having questions about biblical accuracy, historicity, trustworthiness, etc.'</p> <p>In a subsequent conversation, he moved towards belief in God in considering the beauty and the universe: 'And it was over a summer that I really started thinking and Greg and I would go every other day or maybe every day and walk around the park during lunch time and just talk. And I remember at one point just saying, 'You know, I think I do believe in God.' <i>And I don't remember what the catalyst was. It was just looking at the beauty of the park and thinking about the whole creation of the universe and all of these things that I said, 'You know, maybe there is a God.'</i></p> <p>His friend then encouraged him to continue pursuing further questions beyond general belief regarding Jesus and the Bible: 'I was going to church and so I thought, 'Well maybe I should go talk to the pastor' because Greg encouraged me to do that. So, I went and talked to the pastor, and he said, 'We are starting this discipling Bible study and it might be a good place for you because a lot of questions are answered about the Bible, whether or not to believe it, who is Jesus?' <i>I wasn't a Christian, but I had this general believing.'</i></p>	<p>means looking at arguments for and against; otherwise, how are you going to know? How are you going to know that that is what you really believe unless you are willing to let yourself be challenged sometimes? I have learned a lot.</p> <p>And honestly there are days, as CS Lewis said, that 'the whole thing appears a bit improbable.' I would not say that I am one if there are people that my faith is with 100% assuredness that I'm right. I may be in the 90s. I hope. I pray for faith. I ask God to give me more faith because I realize that my faith is not complete. But I don't know that it can ever be. I don't know that I would ever feel comfortable saying that I am 100% sure. There is part of me that says that I don't know that I could be that person. And so, I just keep looking. And it is scary because you realize that there is a part of you that is not so sure, and that part could be influenced... It is easy to feed that part of yourself that already says, 'Well maybe you are wrong.' And so, it is kind of scary. But again, that is why it is for me and lifelong thing, to keep going.'</p> <p>'I influence some of my Atheist friends because they know me and respect me. I'm not the easy 'fundamentalist' target, I take the time to understand what I believe, and I carefully consider claims for and against Christianity. That isn't to say you compromise on essential doctrines.'</p>
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12.9.9. Spirituality, Supernatural and Spiritual Experience

Table 88. Spiritual Narrative Themes

SPIRITUAL Narrative Themes	Pre-conversion Metanarrative	Catalyst Narrative CHANGING SPIRITUAL themes	Conversion Narrative	Post-Conversion Metanarrative
	OLD SPIRITUAL Atheism themes		NEW SPIRITUAL themes	NEW SPIRITUAL Christian themes
	Active religious background	Family influence; Friend/family praying for them;		
	Rote prayer and/or nominal belief in childhood	Attended church, youth group; met Christian(s)		'Used by God' in the 'Kingdom of God'
	Little/no exposure to religious belief	Read/studied the bible, apologetics	Reading the bible prompted conversion	Sustained by God despite periods of doubt
	Rejecting God; No desire to believe; Negative attitude towards religion	Heard/read the gospel; Talked with the pastor/minister	Responded to the gospel; understood need for grace; 'I got saved'; felt forgiven	Began following Jesus; Life change
	Sense of internal 'blackness'	Prayed to God	Prayed to God	Freed from addictions, depression
	Testing God; Unanswered prayer	God as 'moving' them towards conversion	Conversion was a 'work of God'	New spiritual view of the world
	Desired belief but not credible; doubting God	Beauty of creation; beauty of the cross	Convinced Christianity was true	Reliance on the Holy Spirit
	Dark spiritual experiences	Reading the bible prompted spiritual experience	Reading the bible prompted spiritual experience	
	Spiritual curiosity; Spiritual experience(s)	Spiritual experience prior to conversion	Spiritual experience with conversion	Spiritual curiosity
	Spiritual experiences with God	Providential encounters	Spiritual experience after prayer	Post-conversion spiritual experience(s)
	Pre-conversion Metanarrative	Catalyst Narrative CHANGING SPIRITUAL	Conversion Narrative	Post-Conversion Metanarrative
	OLD SPIRITUAL Atheism themes ⁴¹⁰		NEW SPIRITUAL	NEW SPIRITUAL

⁴¹⁰Old Spiritual' ATHEISM Narrative Themes:

Strong religious background: 'My family is very Roman Catholic. My earliest memories of learning about God were actually at a Presbyterian preschool. But those are my earliest memories of learning about God, singing about Him.'; 'Mom was very good about taking us to church and reading has the Bible every night. I can remember her reading us Noah and all of the basic children's stories. She would read every night.'; 'I had grown up in church, a preacher's kid who prayed to receive Christ when I was four. I never matured beyond the Sunday school understanding of avoiding the punishment of hell and gaining the reward of heaven.' (Amanda) (David) (Melissa)

Rote/ritual/nominal childhood belief in God: 'I remember praying occasionally'; When I was very young I probably would have said I was a Christian because that was my experience at the private school and what they taught.'; 'It was just like a very shallow childish cultural thing which quickly evaporated when I started some more adult self-reflection, teenage

self-reflection.’; ‘I grew up in a loosely Catholic household, but without practicing a faith, really, and certainly no sense of a personal relationship with God or even objective understanding of Jesus.’; ‘I think I just had a general sense that God exists when I was a kid.’; ‘I know that for a while there, I tried to be really active in the church there but by the time I was 10 or 11 I had turned into a little Pharisee boy, all judgmental but not towards myself. So, it was all external appearances instead of that peace that you get from a relationship.’; ‘I would characterize myself as a *cultural Christian* back then. I was aware of the gospel message. It did not resonate with me at that time.’; ‘When I was younger, I thought that you just grew up that way [believing in God]. That is just what you believed.’; ‘We didn’t go to church every week. We didn’t go to church very much at all. My parents definitely didn’t believe in the rules. And actually, I am not sure now even if they believe in God. It is not something we talked about.’ (Barbara) (Ryan) (Anthony) (Jennifer) (Matthew) (David) (Carl) (Nicholas) (Heather)

Little/no exposure to religious belief: ‘I had zero concept of a higher power, what that meant, what that looked like. Anything. There was no concept there. I did not grasp it.’; ‘Nothing religious or moral was at home.’; ‘I don’t remember ever hearing the gospel, hearing the name Jesus. You did as a cultural icon, but it didn’t mean anything.’; ‘There just wasn’t a lot of faith. We never prayed as a family. I don’t think I ever heard either of my parents pray.’; ‘I was raised religiously agnostic but found Atheism thanks to David Attenborough in New Zealand TV showings of his nature programs.’; ‘Religion wasn’t really part of our house...I guess as a younger child, I took for granted, ‘yea, there’s probably some kind of God.’ I had heard about Jesus through Bible stories and more or less assumed that’s true, but it never became an ingrained part of our family structure.’; ‘So it was just kind of, it wasn’t necessarily a hostile environment towards spirituality, but it was just so disconnected from day to day by that we never bothered talking about it.’ (Sean) (Ryan) (John) (Paul) (Richard) (Christopher) (Jeremy)

Baptized/Sense of internal blackness: ‘I asked to be baptized when I was seven.’ ‘So, from the very beginning, I had a different outlook on life. [The abuse] was from my babysitter. It was a family friend. I had a very different outlook on life from the beginning. Reaching out to be baptized when I was 7 was, you know when you have an abuse like that, and you have suicidal onset that early, you have sort of a blackness in you. Unless someone experiences it, you can’t understand it. Reaching out to be baptized when I was seven was trying to find something to fill that.’ (David)

Testing God/Unanswered prayer: ‘I can remember at that stage testing God by praying, ‘God, if you exist, then do x.’ And then, x wouldn’t happen, and then in my kind of young mind I would say, ‘What’s this all about?’; ‘And I got on my knees and I pray my heart out, ‘Dear God, please don’t let my dad die.’ Well, three days later we unplugged him, and he died. And I never would have admitted it at the time...I was angry at God because I didn’t get what I wanted. And I basically went on the war path and was just, I went from not knowing to being absolutely certain that there was no God and I was bound and determined to prove it to everybody that I came into contact with.’; ‘There was a defining religious experience that I had when I was six. My great grandfather died. Afterward, there was a Catholic funeral and mass and after he passed, I remember going and every night before I went to bed I prayed, asking God to not let anyone else in my family die. I remember not telling my parents at all about this, that there was some sense that they would disapprove of this or been confused. I prayed every night for three straight weeks...Maybe God isn’t that powerful after all. At that point if you would’ve asked me if I believed in God, I would say I don’t know. In that moment, it felt like God was powerless over death, so what’s the point praying then. That was the sparking moment of when I really felt these beliefs were my own, that God could not be like this.’ (Anthony) (Paul) (Ashley)

Rejecting God: ‘I transitioned from nominal belief into a kind of more self-reflective, Atheism/agnosticism. I just know there was no structural foundation that would hold any sort of weight when it came to thinking about life.’; ‘For at least for two years, I was definitely, ‘there is no God.’; ‘By the time I was 11 or 12, I was like, ‘Mom, Dad doesn’t have to go to church, I don’t have to.’ And so that started my path away from God. By 12, I stopped going to church. Generally, by the age of, because my parents got divorced when I was 14 and that really got me being mad at God. By the time I was 15 I told God that I wanted him out of my life, and I told Satan, I wanted him in my life. I was that pissed off about it all and then in high school I got into dabbling in the occult. In college, I got into drugs. And by then, I just stopped believing that God was real or that he existed.’ ‘By the end of it, I was at the point that I knew drugs were my idol and I would say, ‘This is my god. This is the god that I will worship.’; ‘I became much a believer in science and what it could deliver. My thoughts about God and the afterlife, just God in general went away at that point. I became to believe in myself and in my efforts and what I can do.’; ‘As I got older, when I was 13 or 14, that is when I actually started saying well, all these religions are the same, it is just pick your flavor, which probably means in my mind that there is no God. So, that’s when I became an Atheist’.

(Anthony) (Matthew) (David) (Carl) (Nicholas)

No desire to believe/Negative attitude towards religion: ‘So it’s really not that I didn’t believe. I think that it was because I did not want to believe.’; ‘I grew up thinking that religious is stupid, for the weak.’; ‘By mid teens I was a committed Atheist & openly mocked those who believed in God.’ ‘That was my mentality. I had an idea of religion and I didn’t want anything to do with it’. (Sean) (Joseph) (Richard)

Doubting God/Desired belief but not credible: ‘I didn’t want God not to exist. That didn’t particularly please me. I was fairly convinced that God, as traditionally conceived, was not intellectually defensible but I hoped that there might be all the same some form of transcendence that is out there maybe articulated by another religion but perhaps not.’; ‘If you would have asked me when I was 18 years old if I believe in God, I think I would have said ‘yes’ but I would have had doubts.’ It would have still been something you are supposed to say that. That’s what people say, that sort of thing.’; When we bought a computer, I used it to witness in chat rooms and message boards, even met a few times in person with one of the people to

whom I was witnessing. In the process I discovered people have a lot of doubts about Christianity, and I added those doubts to my own.' (Anthony) (Heather) (Melissa)

Spiritual curiosity: '...age 12 or 13 I started being interested in a spiritualism and things... I was really interested in Mithras'; 'I had a very strong desire to know God. I used to ask my dad questions. I remember when I was about five or so questioning when did God begin? Or when was God born? ...I was very curious about all of these things...I wanted to be close to God. I wanted to know God.'; 'I remember one spiritual thing was I was intrigued by the student society putting up all of these posters talking about winter Celebrations, being all politically correct. And Ewell, the Wiccan approach appealed to me because it connected, 'Oh yeah, there's something special and spiritual about the seasons.' It sort of vaguely unspecified, and so at one point I went out into the woods around Ewell and sat there. I think I brought a candle out with me, sort of in the idea that I would have a spiritual experience, like, 'Here I am, Mother Nature!' Well, nothing happened. I went back inside. Okay. But I think it shows that I was open.' (Jason) (Amanda) (Michelle)

Dark spiritual experiences: 'someone had given me a copy of the Anton LaVey satanic bible and so I started reading through that. I was 17 or 18... So, it is really just an anarchy mindset, an anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment attitude coupled with super-humanism of be happy.'; 'I had had experience with occult stuff with my friends – Wigi boards and this kind of stuff. I had seen someone actually thrown across a room and it freaked me out. I was only 13 years old. The person got [sound effect]. And we had no idea what happened, how the person got on the floor, and I was out of that house like a bullet – never went back. And, I mean, when they talk about the hairs on the back of your head standing up, that is what it felt like, and I was so scared.' 'There were subsequent occult, dark experiences because a couple of years later...There was a guy there at my apartment where I was holding a party. He was a Satanist and he started doing this kind of ceremony thing ...And then something happened. I mean literally, it was like the whole place went ice cold and again the same thing happened and we were all scared...there are these big windows in these old tenement buildings, about 8-9 feet high. It sounded like something tried to push the windows near us, like a crack sound, and we just lost it...There was a presence.

There was something. And, I knew in my mind, emotionally, there was something, we had opened a door of some kind, I don't know what it was... it just freaked me out, so I left [moved out of the apartment].'; 'Fifteen is when I asked Satan into my life and I had the attempt at suicide...In high school I started playing around with the occult, just dabbling. It never became serious or like a religion to me, but I thought 'Oh this is cool. What does this do?' I had numerous experiences. I saw, I was seeing demons. One time I saw a demon in my bedroom about 3 o'clock in the morning and I would not sleep in my room for about three months. But some of that almost goes hand in hand with, when you are inviting that stuff, what do you expect? ...It frightened me, but it also excited me. Yes, I was terrified but at the same time I wanted to learn more, which actually wasn't the smartest or the wisest thing but again this is what happened.' (Jason) (John) (David)

Spiritual experiences with God: 'I probably should mention that I did have experiences with God before becoming an Atheist that I thought were somewhat divine encounters. Part of my rejection of those was because I thought I was just deceiving myself...But for me, without the rational grounding that there could even be a God, I could always explain those kinds of experiences away.' (Amanda)

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⁴¹¹ **‘Changing Spiritual’ CATALYST Narrative Themes:**

Family influence: ‘And that’s how it happened for me. Relationship with my aunt and uncle and ultimately my mother that made this happen...the implements that God used to rescue me.’ (Paul)

Friend/family praying for them: ‘another friend who had recently become a Christian, she said she was praying for us.’; And [my friend] and I talked, and he prayed with me. He prayed for me.’; ‘My sister is a strong Christian and my niece. I was surrounded by people, I am sure they were praying for me at the time, but it wasn’t working. Well it did work in God’s timing.’; ‘It turned out my husband had broken down and prayed two days before that I would find God and our lives would get straightened out. He already knew I wasn’t completely present in our marriage, and when I told him the truth, he wanted to leave, but God put it on his heart to stay.’ (Barbara) (Jason) (Carl) (Melissa)

Attended church; heard/read the gospel: ‘We talked about Jesus all of the time...I had heard the gospel, it only took about three or four times of attending my church’ [after a few weeks of listening online]; ‘We talked about Jesus all of the time...I had heard the gospel, it only took about three or four times of attending my church [after a few weeks of listening online] and I got saved.’; ‘So I kept going along to church and I heard a number of sermons from various people.’ ‘A pastor from a nearby church, he gave me a little gospel tract. He told me to go have a read of that. And I did. And I’ve still got it actually.’; ‘Now I had been going to church with my wife Faye for most of 1998 primarily to get her off of my back about the drinking and the gambling that she knew about. I couldn’t wait to get out of church every Sunday and go to the golf course and do my favorite thing. But God had been convicting me subconsciously about his reality and about my sin.’; It was just this, I had never heard the way that [the pastor] talks about faith and just him giving those little things that he slips in, giving permission for you not to believe what he is saying. It is like thank you. I respect that.’ (Sean) (Joseph) (Carl) (Jessica)

Attended church youth group/small group; met Christian(s): ‘People that I was speaking to, this family, were pretty serious Christians. They spoke a lot about costs of being a Christian. They were joyful, but they emphasized the Lordship of Christ.’; ‘by week three in [small group], I was pretty, I was not at all convinced, but I was becoming more and more interested...I eventually tried praying and the Bible started becoming fascinating to me.’ (Ryan) (Anthony) (Jessica)

Talked with the pastor/minister: ‘I went and talked to the pastor, and he said, ‘We are starting this discipling Bible study and it might be a good place for you because a lot of questions are answered about the Bible, whether or not to believe it, who is Jesus?’’ (Jason) **Studied the bible:** ‘I started that class and some point during that class I felt convicted that I was sure that there was a God. And I also felt I needed to make sure that I also saw the Christian story as viable.’ (Sean) (Jason)

Appreciated beauty of creation / beauty of the cross: ‘It was just looking at the beauty of the park and thinking about the whole creation of the universe and all of these things that I said, ‘You know, maybe there is a God... I wasn’t a Christian, but I had this general believing.’; ‘I also recognized the validity of the Christian moral framework - the idea that we are all sinners in need of grace - and was impressed by the beauty of the cross.’ ‘Along this process there were these intellectual arguments but there were also personal arguments. I started feeling the weight of my sin very strongly, that I was not living up to my ideals. And, as I saw, when he explained to me, I saw a beauty in Christianity that I had never seen before I had seen the link... I had grown up going to mass with my grandmother. I had seen Christ on the cross thousands of times, but I did not really know what it meant. To me, it was kind of gruesome. Why is this there? It doesn’t make sense. But when he explained it to me, this is a sign of God dying for you. Then I was, like, this is love, this is beauty, and I remember debating with my high school mentor when he was talking to me about ethics, about what love means. He said, ‘Love is sacrifice!’... Sacrifice is love. It clicked.’ (Jason) (Ashley)

God as ‘moving’ them towards conversion: ‘It was interweaving Christian service and disciplines into the [bible study] course...And so I see that as God moving in this.’ ‘I don’t think it was the weight of the evidence that convinced me. Granted it doesn’t hurt, but I definitely think there was direct involvement from God in actually opening me to even consider things.’ (Jason) (Ryan)

Prayed to God: ‘There was definitely, this just, it felt like a small loss to me. I now have to let go of all of this stuff that I have held onto for a really long time. This battle is over, if you will. I was not at all convinced, I shouldn’t say not at all. I was more open to the possibility of it, and maybe even wanted it to be true a little bit. But definitely, it was not a prayer where I am thinking I am confident that someone is hearing this. It was, ‘I really hope you are, otherwise I feel silly.’ I was in a pretty dark place with my circumstances and everything, but it is really interesting.’ (Jessica) (David)

Providential encounters: ‘...that weekend of that trip was when I engaged [the Christian and the Muslim] when they were talking about the resurrection. And then that was how we really started getting into those discussions. It was very, one little weird thing after another that just all happened to fall into place. It was definitely providential.’; And when I got off the phone, like I said, I did not believe in God anymore. But I actually said a prayer. I said, ‘God, if you are real, I need your help. I need out of this.’ I was 22 at this time...And I no sooner then hung up the phone and the phone rang again. And this time it was my cousin. I was in Dallas and it was my cousin happens to be driving to Dallas for three days and want to see me. And I was like, ‘Oh my freaking gosh. Oh my God, God is real!’ I was just like, ‘holy...’ It blew me away.’ (Amanda) (David)

Reading the bible prompted spiritual experience: ‘it wasn’t like a vision or anything like that, but I was really feeling so strongly drawn to the character of Jesus and that was, it hard to explain they discord in my mind, but I was thinking that

Christianity is probably true being strongly, supernaturally, powerfully attracted to the person of Jesus but somehow still hating Christianity. I know it doesn't make a lot of sense to say these things in concert but that is the discord that was going on in my mind and heart there. And the spiritual experience is when I would read or think anything about Jesus. And I just remember reading the Bible and literally shaking when I read the gospels because I just could not that there is a person like this, that this person was God, and that this person cared for me. Even though I wasn't necessarily willing to jump in full boat at that point, that was like a draw on my heart that I felt needed an answer.' (Christopher)

Spiritual curiosity: 'Over time, my Atheism softened, and I became more interested in and accepting of spirituality in general. I researched Buddhism, Wicca, and various forms of New Age spirituality.' 'I was vaguely interested in what you would call spirituality and I read a lot of books in New Age and Buddhism and stuff like that. I was not even at that point willing to even consider Christianity as an option. I couldn't put my finger necessarily on a strong reason why other than I just knew, 'it's not that.' Of all of the possible options out there, it's certainly not that.'; 'So I started checking out other things, thinking well, maybe there is something to spirituality, but I don't think it is God, the Judeo-Christian God. I went to Buddhist temples and I went to Hindu temples...I am meeting these people who are wonderful. But yet, the spiritual side of it feels empty. So how are they such wonderful people? I just couldn't reconcile all of that. It was very confusing. No substance underneath in the religious part of it, but so much substance with the people. I did not know what to do with that.' (Christopher) (Jessica)

Spiritual experience(s) with God: 'There was an isolated event that kicked it off. It was weird because I was so skeptical, I was putting it behind me, so he sort of came back and kept going. He wasn't finished for a while. I think I was so skeptical and so stubborn. It was the theories that I had about what was going on, and I just kept getting theories instead of acknowledging what was going on. Too skeptical, I think.' (Melissa)

412 **'New Spiritual' CONVERSION Narrative Themes:**

Prayed to God: 'I feel like I was three fourths of the way there and maybe that pushed me over the finish line or something. When I prayed it was kind of like this, 'Okay God, I'm not sure if you are listening. I am kind of able to accept that maybe, perhaps You are real that there is something to this or people have told themselves a really, really good lie for thousands of years. I would like to know so either way, I don't think I hate you anymore.' That is kind of how it was.' (Jessica)

Responded to the gospel; understood need for grace; 'I got saved'; felt forgiven: 'I...heard the gospel and I got saved.'; 'I remember one night praying about that. It seemed to me that this guy Jesus was who he said he was and that was for me sort of the big turning point.'; 'Eventually, I started thinking and feeling more and more 'Christianly' until, one time a church, an offer was made to pray to Jesus and become a Christian. I still had a myriad of doubts, but I decided I had enough to go on and I prayed to 'become a Christian' that day.' 'There were no other religions that operated by grace, I began to realize that I was in a lot of trouble if it was karma, and that it spoke to something so unspeakably deep that I longed for and needed.'; 'I was suddenly struck with an immense sense of remorse, not just for my held beliefs that had turned out to be false but also for the actions that had grown out of them and how my statements and actions had influenced others... And all I could say was, 'I'm wrong.' A few days later I attended a church service and responded to an altar call to receive Christ.'; 'Definitely [felt] forgiveness [during conversion experience]. It was like a two-ton weight just lifted off of my shoulders. ...There was just a...at first at that particular time after reading that there was just a sense of conviction and that I had wasted some of my life, my teenage years, and that I needed to make a change. Yeah, and just a real strong sense of forgiveness and ahhh, like wow, this is really real, not just a fairy tale. I was just kind of shocked and overwhelmed.'; 'You'll never guess what I did last night.' And they said, 'What?' And I said, 'I think I asked Jesus to come into my life.'; 'All of a sudden, I was convicted by the reality of God and by my sin at 7:30 in the morning going down 231. The conviction was of the sort that this realization came bubbling up from my subconscious into my conscious mind...So I literally cried out to God at that point and I didn't promise anything. I turned my life over to him as I understood him. I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior as I understood Him. I confessed my sins as I understood them. I did not promise anything other than that the next moment I would submit to God's will the next moment, because I didn't know if I could make it two moments.' (Sean) (Joseph) (Anthony) (Jennifer) (Amanda) (Matthew) (David) (Carl)

Reading the bible prompted conversion: 'I think it was a very radical change that happened just like that.' 'I knew almost nothing but in the biblical sense. In conversion you know you actually know that you've been converted. You know that it's true, but you may not be able to justify that.' (Richard)

Reading the bible prompted spiritual experience: 'And, it was in I John where he talked about if you love the world you can't say that you love God... And, at that point, the Holy Spirit just really convicted me. I could really sense that He was present and, in the room, and real. And so, it was kind of like a religious experience type of thing and at that point...And, I don't want to say physically sense, but really sense a presence here. So, at that point I repented and got on my knees and I don't even remember what I said, but at that point I was different. I was changed. I believe that is when I was born again.' Later he stated, 'having that experience, it was unmistakable.' (Matthew)

Spiritual experience with conversion: 'And there was also an experiential element. I remember praying that Christ would be forgiving that I would receive...It was a warming experience.'; 'And I'm getting high. And before I realized it, it is Oral Roberts. And I really don't know what he said, but I just hung on every word he was saying. And then he gives his alter call and he turns to the TV. 'Now all of you who want to ask Jesus into their life, get on your knees and lift your hands in the air.' I put my drug paraphernalia down, I'm getting on my knees and putting my hands up in the air and repeating this prayer. I saw and felt something. For the longest time, I described it as fairy dust coming out of the ceiling or whatever. I know now when you get saved the Holy Spirit comes on you. And I saw the Holy Spirit come.'; 'It all became real on

September 22, 2005, when God smacked me upside the head. I am leaving out details no Atheist would believe unless they experienced them, but He influenced me to tell my husband everything I had ever done. It felt like I threw my whole marriage and our parenting up in the air and trusted God to catch it and help it all land safely on the ground.' (Joseph) (David) (Melissa)

Conversion was a 'work of God': 'The only way that I can explain that [willingness to attend church] is that God was at work.'; 'God used everything and everybody the way that he does to get you on the straight and narrow...Every event, every place and every person, major events in your life to insignificant little details that made you take a left or a right. It's amazing what God can do and who he uses. Literally everything.' 'It was all God. And thank God! I thank God that God chose me because I would not have chosen him.'; 'He takes out a heart of stone and puts in a heart of flesh.' And without that, the evidence wouldn't have mattered.'; 'It doesn't make any sense. It is definitely a God thing that I can't explain.' 'I believe he chooses, not that we choose him.' (Barbara) (Sean) (Ryan) (Paul)

Convinced Christianity was true: 'Then over time as I continued to study, I was reading Evidence that Demands a Verdict on my own and I was reading the New Testament in this study and see the person of Jesus and that the film and old testament prophecies and see how that story as a whole ties together and how it makes sense as a big story.'; 'Because at some point I just realized, I was just like, 'Yeah, I don't believe that stuff anymore. I believe this now.' And I never really had a specific moment when I switched because everything happened so gradually. It was just, I kind of just realized like, 'Hey, I actually believe like Christians, what Christianity teaches now.''; 'I think I became intellectually convinced that it was true before I surrendered to it emotionally, spiritually.'; There was this moment, where I said, God, my head gets it. My head thinks it is true, but my heart is totally not in it. What is wrong with this? What is wrong with me? Over the course of my experience, I was realizing as I went on this walk, this would be a journey, and I couldn't know where it would end up, but that I needed to put one foot in front of the other and keep going, keep trying. That, if my head really thought this was true then my heart would follow again later. It was at that point that I decided that I should get baptized. I was ready to commit... I have to pursue it as a Christian.' (Jason) (Ryan) (Christopher) (Ashley)

⁴¹³ 'New Spiritual' POST-CONVERSION Narrative Themes:

'Used by God' in the 'Kingdom of God': (Barbara)

New spiritual view of the world: 'And for me the world did feel like a different place afterwards. I tell people, it's kind of like the moment when I left the Matrix. That was very much the point of it.'; 'I told [my friend], it was like I received Christian eyes...It was almost as if I was standing somewhere on the planet and the whole planet had shifted. That was my experience. Everything had turned around. All my morals had flipped over and reversed. It was very sudden and instant that way.'; 'And, the next day when I went to school and normally everybody just, so many different people got on my nerves and I just sensed like compassion towards them because I wanted them to have what I had.' (Joseph) (Amanda) (Matthew)

Began following Jesus / Life Transformation: 'I started following Jesus, hanging with Christians.'; 'Since I've become a Christian, I have integrated more and more the way I think about those things in a way that is broadly Christian. I have grown in what it means to follow God or to be a Christian and how I live my life.'; 'But I felt, not like a peace, the more of a realization within a couple of days of trying to pray. That, okay, if this is real, then this is a bigger deal than I ever thought. This is not something that means now I have something different to do on Sundays. This is not something that means that I have a different group of friends. This is something that means everything changes... So, just feeling 'Okay, it is not all about me.' You would think that would be to get a sad thing, or a bummer, like, now I have to live for someone else, but it was very much like 'Okay, this is something I can believe'. And I think that was the turning point, honestly. There was something shallow about Christianity the way it was presented before, and this was very, very deep and very, very real. It is just bigger than me. So being told, 'Hey, get over yourself...God doesn't exist to grant your wishes or any of that. You exist to glorify Him' and that was huge.'; Besides guiding me to tell my husband the truth that day, God helped me quit smoking and let go of other addictions. Life wasn't all sunshine and roses—things got much worse before they got better, but God was on our side and carried us through the storm of insanity. I refer to it sometimes as the fiery whirlwind. God broke me, sifted me and refined me. He made His saving love real to me by offering me His hand and giving me the choice to be saved out of the mud when I still wallowed in it. The transformation God brought about in my life helped me and my husband go from the nightmarish brink of divorce, to best friends in love all over again, united in our faith. He helped me gradually restore the intimacy mothers are supposed to share with our children.' (Joseph) (Ryan) (Jessica) (Melissa)

Freed from addictions, depression: Nine months after conversion, David was 'delivered from drugs, freed from depression and suicidal thoughts' through a pastor's prayer and through another 'filling of the Holy Spirit'; 'I have not had a drink or placed a bet since February 1, 1999. It is not in my strength. It is obviously in His strength.' 'When I was tempted the first day, the first time, the thought would come to my mind that I had try in my own strength to quit drinking many, many times and I had never been able to. I turned the problem over to God with a tiny, tiny bit of faith as small as a mustard seed one time. And if I leave it with him it is a done deal. He will prevent me from drinking or gambling. He will provide a way out. I Corinthians 10:13. I have recited it a million, a lot of times. That is the way God's prevention manifests itself to me.' (David) (Carl)

Reliance on the Holy Spirit / God: 'We need the Holy Spirit to guide us and move us...you have to be spiritually mature, not only intellectually but spiritually as well.' (Nicholas)

Table 89. Spiritual Reality shift: ‘Denial of God’ to ‘Belief in God’ through Spiritual Experience

Spiritual BR Shift	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative ‘Denial of God’ to	Post-Conversion Metanarrative ‘Belief in God’ through spiritual experience
SPIRITUAL Biographical Reconstruction F2 #13 Sean	<p>Atheism: As a child, religion was foreign to Sean, including prayer, Jesus, God, or the gospel: ‘My mom was raised Catholic and that made sense because when I was a little kid, we would spend the holidays with my grandparents. <i>We did this funny thing where we put our hands together and somebody said some words before we ate, and I always thought that was really strange. That was never explained to me.</i>’</p> <p>[So there was no frame of reference for Jesus?] ‘Nothing. I never heard the gospel. I had zero concept of a higher power, what that meant, what that looked like. Anything. There was no concept there. I did not grasp it.’</p> <p>At 16 years old, Sean decided he was an Atheist because he didn’t want to believe in God: ‘I don’t know if there was anything in particular that just made me believe that</p>	<p>Conversion (cont.): Despite his rebellion and unwillingness to ‘choose God’, he attributes his conversion to ‘God choosing him’: <i>‘There was nothing about me that wanted to find God or believe in God or know Jesus. I chose the opposite of that. I chose against God. I chose screw the Bible. I chose I don’t want to know anything about God, that’s stupid. I chose I don’t want to have anything to do with your religion, that’s stupid. That’s what I chose. So really for me to say that I really did anything would be wrong. It was all God. And thank God! I thank God that God chose me because I would not have chosen him. And if he would have let me, I would have gone screaming and crawling away, but he did not let me. He showed up on a horse, a white horse, sword and pistol by his side, big muscles, and He grabbed me by the hair, by the neck, by the face and wasn’t going to take no for an answer. That was my first impression of God.’⁴¹⁴</i></p>

Sustained by God despite periods of doubt: ‘I think we all get rocked to our core in same way at some point, but God is just still there. And there are just some things that are not necessary for me to understand. And, thank God that’s the case. Otherwise it is finite, and it depends on me again.’ (Jennifer)

Spiritual experience after prayer: ‘I just remember while I was crying and being prayed for then I started laughing with joy. I remember spending the last two weeks not eating or sleeping, and I just remember sitting back in my chair just like ahhh, ‘Wow, I feel like a human again.’ I remember saying that, and I remember doing this, I remember feeling these arms just wrap around me, physically being held. I could feel the warmth and everything. It was the strangest sensation. That’s the only time it has ever really happened to me. It hasn’t happened since. But in that moment, I just knew that God loved me like a father, and he had me in his arms.’; ‘[two weeks after conversion] I came home and got on my knees after being hounded by doubts and feeling really terrible and wondering if it was too good to be true and I don’t know. I just asked God to help me. And, as I was praying, I just started speaking in other tongues and had a whole other kind of religious experience. I had never heard about that. Nobody had ever talked to me about that. I had never gone to a Pentecostal or charismatic church in my life up until then. I thought it was extremely weird at the time and was even a little freaked out of what was coming out of my mouth, but I could just sense so much peace and so much of that same experience that I had before that I knew it had to be real.’ (Sean) (Matthew)

Post-conversion spiritual experience(s): ‘People have experiences of spirits or supernatural events. That is not necessarily a good foundation for a religious viewpoint. But at the same time, I recognize that for that person, that experience is compelling and can solidify their view about God. And I have had personal experiences that have solidified my belief in God and in Christ.’; ‘People try to use experiences like that to validate a belief in God, but for me it could be explained by other means because it is not technically miraculous. But now, in the context of believing in God, all of those experiences become extremely meaningful. So, it’s pretty awesome.’; ‘There are a few things like that that have happened. Just like moments where I think I don’t know what to do, at the end of the rope and then the next moment I do know. There are a handful of things like that where I had a question and there seemed to be a very direct answer, either with a picture falling off the wall or just like internally where I understood something that I thought was impossible to understand.’ (Jason) (Amanda) (Heather)

⁴¹⁴ This description of strong rebellion and resistance met with an even stronger God is interesting. I wonder if his ‘tough’ father’s personality is somehow transferred into his depiction of God as even tougher, stronger. I wonder if the concept of surrendering appears too weak for his own ‘tough’ personality, that he would not have surrendered on his own, giving the appearance of weakness.

	<p>there was no God. When I look back, there were so many times where as an Atheist I was writing things where I was talking about God. <i>So, it's really not that I didn't believe. I think that it was because I did not want to believe.'</i></p> <p>Catalyst: Sean began studying the bible in response to a challenge from a Christian co-worker. He began studying the bible online, attending church, and 'heard the gospel'.</p> <p>Conversion: After becoming open to studying the bible and attending church, he 'got saved': 'We talked about Jesus all of the time...I had heard the gospel, it only took about three or four times of attending my church [after a few weeks of listening online] and <i>I got saved. It happened that fast. Getting to that point was a long haul, a hard, gruesome process. But once I got to that point that I started studying, it did not take me long at all.'</i></p> <p>Sean describes how 'God used everything' to lead him to conversion: [what prompted a change in your worldview?] <i>'Everything. I mean everything. God used everything and everybody the way that he does to get you on the straight and narrow...Every event, every place and every person, major events in your life to insignificant little details that made you take a left or a right. It's amazing what God can do and who he uses. Literally everything.'</i></p>	<p>Post-conversion: One year after his conversion, Sean also described a spiritual experience after prayer: 'And there have been a few times where, or maybe just one time at least, when <i>I can physically feel God's arms wrapped around me</i> somehow. It was strange. It was totally wacky. There was one time when I just, there was something that wrapped around me. I could feel it. It was another one of those rock-bottom places for me. It was after a really hard breakup...I had lost my job. I was glad that I lost my job because I spent eight months unemployed, studying the Bible...I prayed, 'God help me to be good like you are good.' I just realized how terrible I was, and how good and gracious and loving God is.</p> <p>My roommate had come out, hard-core Christian, and had prayed with me and as strange it as it may sound, like a little exorcism. He prayed, 'God, I just pray that you would rid any evil, would cast out any evil from Eric's heart and mind, whatever darkness that is in him, cast it out in the name of Jesus.' And it worked. I could feel it physically. It was the strangest thing. It was the darndest thing. I could physically feel this hard pain in my heart just [poof]. It was so weird, and I never would have believe that...Until it happens to me. ⁴¹⁵</p> <p>I just remember while I was crying and being prayed for then I started laughing with joy. I remember spending the last two weeks not eating or sleeping, and I just remember sitting back in my chair just like ahhh, 'Wow, I feel like a human again.' I remember saying that, and I remember doing this, <i>I remember feeling these arms just wrap around me, physically being held. I could feel the warmth and everything. It was the strangest sensation. That's the only time it has ever really happened to me. It hasn't happened since. But in that moment, I just knew that God loved me like a father, and he had me in his arms. Maybe it was all in my head.'</i>⁴¹⁶</p>
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⁴¹⁵ This passage demonstrably reveals Sean's belief in the supernatural realm, both evil and good.

⁴¹⁶ This spiritual experience of a 'tender' father was quite different than the 'tough' father image he described earlier in his story. Perhaps he had never felt the love of his earthly father and yet found the love he had always desired from his 'heavenly father'.

<p>SPIRITUAL Biographical Reconstruction</p> <p>F3 #36 John</p>	<p>Atheism: Growing up, John was unfamiliar with Christianity apart from cultural icons and ceremonial rituals: ‘I don’t remember ever hearing the gospel, hearing the name Jesus. You did as a cultural icon, but it didn’t mean anything.’</p> <p>As a teenager, he encountered a ‘spiritual awakening’ to dark spirituality through particular occurrences: ‘Because for me, there was this spiritual awakening for me when I was a teenager...Because <i>I had had experience with occult stuff with my friends – Wigi boards</i> and this kind of stuff. <i>I had seen someone actually thrown across a room and it freaked me out. I was only 13 years old.</i> The person got [sound effect]. <i>And we had no idea what happened, how the person got on the floor, and I was out of that house like a bullet – never went back. And, I mean, when they talk about the hairs on the back of your head standing up, that is what it felt like, and I was so scared.</i>’</p> <p>[So it awakened you to some spiritual reality?] ‘It did. <i>The dark side...and there were subsequent occult, dark experiences</i> because a couple of years later there was another thing in an apartment I had. There was a guy there at my apartment where I was holding a party. <i>He was a Satanist and he started doing this kind of ceremony thing...and then something happened.</i> I mean literally, it was like <i>the whole place went ice cold and again the same thing happened and we were all scared...there are these big windows in these old tenement buildings, about 8-9 feet high. It sounded like something tried to push the windows near us, like a crack sound, and we just lost it. I mean people went... The music went off. Everything went silent. Everybody started looking and they all started filtering out.</i> Well, that was my apartment. I had to stay there! Which I did for two days and then I left it. <i>I abandoned it. I couldn’t stay there so I left. Something had come in and hadn’t left.</i></p> <p><i>...So, I stayed the night. There was light. There was a presence. There was something. And, I knew in my mind, emotionally, there was something, we had</i></p>	<p>Although John was awakened to dark spirituality, he did not believe in any kind of alternative ‘good’ spirituality:</p> <p>[You declared your Atheism at age 15 but you experienced, even prior and aft, that there is a spiritual reality out there.] ‘You see, that’s the thing. I thought about that even post-conversion, I never understood why I couldn’t ...I haven’t been able to figure out why I couldn’t deduce if there was dark power that there was good power. But, I hadn’t joined the dots. I hadn’t joined the dots in my mind. It was like something was there and I was aware of that spiritual dimension then but resisting it. But of course, I didn’t see...there was no narrative there.’ [You didn’t have a framework?] ‘No, there was nothing to put it into...There were just no markers, there was just nothing to interpret the experience other than the movies and the occult, wigi boards...we knew with the dead there might be spirits and powers, but what were they we didn’t know! Relating that, then, to God, just didn’t compute at all.’</p> <p>Catalyst: When John visited a Christian couple’s home with his girlfriend, he described ‘a presence’ of something akin to ‘goodness’ ‘a feeling of innocence’:</p> <p>Conversion: During this conversation, John became convinced that God was real and that he needed God’s forgiveness: ‘It went from being I was 100% convinced there was no God to beginning to think there might be a God to pretty much there is a God and I had to do something about this. So, I ended up going up into their bathroom and praying.’</p> <p>[That evening? All the walls, all the defenses, stereotypes...] ‘When it became clear that there was a God, and now I was aware that I was a sinner...there was little doubt about that because I knew everything that I had done and all the things I was involved in, but I just thought if there is this God, there is the holiness of God – there is that fear. Of course, they immediately moved to <i>the gospel, that</i></p>

	<p><i>opened a door of some kind, I don't know what it was... it just freaked me out so I left.' [You packed up and moved out?] 'Yes, I went and found another apartment. That was all pre-conversion, about 2 ½ years prior to that.'</i></p> <p>Although John was awakened to dark spirituality, he did not believe in any kind of alternative 'good' spirituality: [You declared your Atheism at age 15 but you experienced, even prior and aft, that there is a spiritual reality out there.] 'You see, that's the thing. I thought about that even post-conversion, I never understood why I couldn't ...I haven't been able to figure out why I couldn't deduce if there was dark power that there was good power. But, I hadn't joined the dots. I hadn't joined the dots in my mind. It was like something was there and I was aware of that spiritual dimension then but resisting it. But of course, I didn't see...there was no narrative there.'</p> <p>[You didn't have a framework?] 'No, there was nothing to put it into...There were just no markers, there was just nothing to interpret the experience other than the movies and the occult, wigi boards...we knew with the dead there might be spirits and powers, but what were they we didn't know! Relating that, then, to God, just didn't compute at all.'</p> <p>Catalyst: When John visited a Christian couple's home with his girlfriend, he described 'a presence' of something akin to 'goodness' 'a feeling of innocence': <i>'...their house was a bit unusual. There was unusual feeling in it. That was the connection to the other story. I remember, I walked out, I can't explain it, there was just a presence of something, it just seemed – for lack of a better word – goodness. I mean, I couldn't have defined it then as that but there was no television. I mean who didn't have a television in their living room? So, that was odd. And they were a young, modern couple – attractive, trendy. But, this feeling of innocence, something like that.'</i></p> <p>The couple began to talk with John about God, the problem of the human condition, and God's love: 'They would look up a lot of passages and they would ask, 'Well what</p>	<p><i>there is forgiveness and the love of God, and I thought, 'Well, that just can't be right.' And so, of course, they really stressed the cross and forgiveness and God's love and the gospel.'</i></p> <p>John prayed to God for forgiveness: <i>'So, I prayed and went back downstairs. And, they all started hugging me because they asked what I did, and I told them. That was weird, but it was a start and it really did, it was the beginning. I know something had happened. I didn't know what. I just knew I had prayed and said, 'if you are there, I need to know you, and I want to ask for forgiveness.' They had told me what to pray.'</i></p> <p>Post-conversion: After becoming a Christian, he experienced another encounter with dark spirituality. But this time, he was unafraid because he was 'under the Lord's protection': <i>'...very early on after I got converted...I sensed that whatever that was [the dark spirituality] was obviously set free and it couldn't touch me.'</i></p> <p>But in fact I remember a time no longer I had become a Christian when...they confiscated our vehicle and put us back to West Germany...it wasn't until the next morning that <i>we realized that there was something weird about this. During the night there was all kinds of noises and things happening. I woke up in the room, again that same feeling, that there was something in my room, a presence, and I heard these words, 'You're under the blood.'</i> And, I went back to sleep.</p> <p>And when I came down, these two girls that had been with me, they said, 'Did you hear...' We came down and the hotel was empty. But, then <i>we looked around. African artifacts everywhere. A white grand piano, bones, occult stuff hanging all over the place.</i> We hadn't seen any of this. So, the people must have been into black magic or something like that. Because Germans, there's a strong pagan element.</p> <p><i>...The girls said they heard noises and they opened the door but there was no one there.</i> But, putting the two together for me, waking up exhausted because we had been interrogated for two days, <i>waking up</i></p>
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	do you think about this?’ and they would talk about judgment, the end of time. They talked about the holiness of God. They talked about the condition of man. They talked about what sin is and how it works, about the wages of sin for Him, that God is real, and that God wants and loves us but that sin separates us. But, maybe I couldn’t see God because I was so wrapped up in everything that I did that I didn’t realize I could never see Him.’ ⁴¹⁷	<i>sensing this dark presence and then sensing in that case the protection of the Lord, ‘you’re under the blood.’⁴¹⁸</i>
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Table 90. Spiritual Reality shift: ‘Denial of God’ to ‘Belief in God’ without Spiritual Experience

Spiritual BR Shift	Pre-Conversion Metanarrative ‘Denial of God’ to	Post-Conversion Metanarrative ‘Belief in God’ without spiritual experience
SPIRITUAL Biographical Reconstruction F2 #41 Ryan	<p>Atheism: Growing up, religion was irrelevant: <i>‘Nothing religious or moral was at home... If you asked my mom, she would say she believes in God but is not really, maybe it is just an idea like, ‘Hey I believe in the moon,’ but it really doesn’t change anything. And then as for my dad, I don’t think he had any real convictions about anything like that. It wasn’t even a concern for him.’</i></p> <p><i>‘When I was very young I probably would have said I was a Christian because that was my experience at the private school and what they taught. But we left that after third-grade and we get out in the middle of the desert in the tumbleweeds and there was just no part of that anymore. That idea just faded away because it wasn’t something that we actually as a family cared about. So, I don’t remember when that happened, probably high school I decided that I was an Atheist. I just sort of lived like that through well after I got out of the military.’</i></p> <p>Catalyst: He attended youth group from age 13-18; at age 18 he met a Christian girl and began an intentional search to determine the truth or falsity of Christianity, resulting in a long, gradual process towards belief:</p>	<p>Conversion: Ryan describes a gradual belief in Christianity: ‘Because at some point I just realized, I was just like, ‘Yeah, I don’t believe that stuff anymore. I believe this now.’ <i>And I never really had a specific moment when I switched because everything happened so gradually. It was just, I kind of just realized like, ‘Hey, I actually believe like Christians, what Christianity teaches now.’</i></p> <p>Although he believed Christian was true based on the evidence, he was convinced due to ‘direct involvement from God’ in producing a willingness in him to believe: <i>‘In hindsight, I don’t think it was the weight of the evidence that convinced me. Granted it doesn’t hurt, but I definitely think there was direct involvement from God in actually opening me to even consider things. Had the circumstances been different through the interactions with my wife and the scenarios of actually listening and considering what other people had to say...Like, if someone would’ve actually just said, ‘Hey, let’s talk about the things that you believe’ and just presented a bunch of evidence, I would not have cared. It was just not something that I, so I mean it’s not... The evidence was very helpful in learning as I went along and the idea that ‘Hey, this stuff is actually true’ was</i></p>

⁴¹⁷ This statement some might refer to as a ‘spiritual blindness’.

⁴¹⁸ John held quite a different perspective on experiences of dark spirituality after conversion – moving from strong fear (pre-conversion) to peace and sense of ‘the Lord’s protection’ (post-conversion).

	<p>[So, it was a process over time where there was a rather cumulative effect, building of the substance of the Christian worldview and understanding was lacking in the Atheist worldview. Was there a tipping point at some point?]</p> <p>‘Yes, that is one of those things that I have always struggled with is defining a point...here’s where I used to be in here’s where I am now. It was <i>a long transition</i> and I never had a Blues Brothers moment for the light shines through the church and then I danced down the center. I never had that. <i>It was a very slow process without any real distinct road markers</i> that I can spot along the way.</p>	<p>meaningful; but, <i>I wouldn’t say it was something that I was just argued into.</i>⁴¹⁹</p> <p>[For clarification, God was informing and moving in you to open you towards the reality of His existence and the reality of Christ?]</p> <p>‘Yeah. Like God says, <i>‘He takes out a heart of stone and puts in a heart of flesh.’ And without that, the evidence wouldn’t have mattered. Skeletons don’t care about arguments. But the arguments and evidence were important. I think that was only in conjunction with God being involved in it.</i>’</p> <p>Post-conversion: Ryan continues to see God as primarily instrumental in religious conversion in his own life as well as in the lives of others: <i>‘God called us, regenerated us, gave us new hearts and renewed our minds...God was gracious to us...We are in a position of being rescued.</i></p>
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⁴¹⁹ Although truth was important to him, he contends his belief and conversion was substantiated for more than rational intellectual belief; rather, it was God opening him towards ‘seeing’ God and Christianity as true and real that was of primary importance. Ryan speaks of changing his presuppositions, his way of ‘seeing’ reality in a new way as something that was accomplished beyond self.

12.10. Integrated Narrative Analysis Memo Example, Christopher

Table 91. Integrated Influences: Sample Narrative with Reflexivity, Christopher
[Reflexive comments in footnotes and at the end of the Integrated Narrative Analysis Memo]]

S1 Christopher 30yo male US Atheism: 18 Conversion: 22 Yrs since RC: 8	PRE-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE	CHANGING META-NARRATIVE	CONVERSION NARRATIVE	POST-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE
	[Creation]	[Fall]	[Redemption]	[Restoration]
	Atheist Stage	Catalyst Stage	Conversion Stage	Post-Conversion Stage
Narrative Embodied	Q32. Please provide a brief summary of your conversion from Atheism to Christianity. Participation Date: 9/26/2014 14:43			
Emic Perspective [survey story]	<p>PRE-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE [Creation – understanding where we came from] My journey from Atheism to Christianity came in phases. Earlier in my life, I hated Christianity with an almost religious fervor. I abhorred (real and perceived) hypocrisy and judgmentalism in Christians. I found Christian moral constraints both untrue and subjectively repulsive.⁴²⁰</p> <p>CATALYST [Fall – understanding where we are]</p> <p>Over time, my Atheism softened, and I became more interested in and accepting of spirituality in general. I researched Buddhism, Wicca, and various forms of New Age spirituality. I did not subscribe to any of them, but I was intrigued and more or less open.⁴²¹</p> <p>I also began to consider that Christianity was more complex than I once held: it was both a force for good as well as a force of ignorance and oppression in our society. During this time, I was strongly searching for answers to the question of moral grounding and objective value. Atheism provided unsatisfying and hopelessly contradictory answers, which is one of the reasons I became open to various forms of spirituality.⁴²² I became more seriously interested in Christianity through watching debates online, particularly William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, and Ravi Zacharias. Their debates and lectures seemed eminently reasonable, and it seemed clear to me that they trounced their opponents in every debate (albeit graciously). Still, I was only convinced that Christianity was more or less reasonable, not that it was actually true.</p> <p>I read a few more books on the subject (The Case for Christ and some more technical books by F.F. Bruce) and began gradually to believe Christianity was probably true. I finally went to church one morning, expecting to hate it and have my apprehensions confirmed, and the love and grace of the congregation, coupled with the brilliance of the sermon, crushed my defenses.</p> <p>CONVERSION [Redemption – understanding what we have become]</p>			

⁴²⁰ Closed posturing: Strong language of contempt against Christianity: hatred, fervor, abhor, repulsive.

⁴²¹ The importance of openness shown here prior to consideration of other ideologies.

⁴²² Dissatisfaction with his own worldview preceded and allowed for openness towards others.

	<p>I prayed and debated a lot in the following weeks and eventually, at some point, became a Christian. My mind had been slowly convinced at a rational, logical level, but suddenly it became very real.⁴²³</p> <p>POST-CONVERSION META-NARRATIVE [Restoration – understanding what we are becoming / will become]</p>
Emic Perspective [Interview]	<p>Yellow – Function Non-Yellow – Substance (Green (SI), Blue (Canonical Text), Turquoise (SE))</p>
LANGUAGE	ATHEISM STAGE
<p>Atheism stage</p> <p>Context & Community</p>	<p>Christopher grew up in an irreligious household with minimal and/or negative church experience:</p> <p>‘I grew up in a more or less irreligious household. My mom came from a Pentecostal background and my father came from a Catholic background, but neither of them retained the religion of their parents so religion wasn’t really part of our house. We didn’t really pray together or talk about God. And we would occasionally go to church for little bouts at a time. We would go a couple of weeks here or there. But, it was never really a part of our lives.</p> <p>So I guess as a younger child, I took for granted, ‘Yeah, there’s probably some kind of God.’ I had heard about Jesus through Bible stories and more or less assumed that’s true but it had never become an ingrained part of our family structure.</p> <p>So when I became a teenager, I began to question and began seeking out answers to more difficult questions, the answers weren’t really there. And, like I said, we were going here and there to <i>church</i>. <i>And, they didn’t give very compelling answers to any of the questions that I would ask</i>. So, I guess that’s what really led me to question whether it was true or not. And, in addition to that, there’s the emotional aspect of perceiving hypocrisy in the church as well, and that was also a driving force.’</p> <p>Christopher described his nominal socio-cultural Christianity:</p> <p>‘Most people that I knew were like me where they grew up where Christianity was somewhere in the background and more or less it was <i>presumed to be true, but it was never really thought about or never really practiced</i>. It was just something that you would assume. And, I think that just the nature of it being the default position, made people who were more prone to question things a little eager to walk away from it.’⁴²⁴</p> <p>And, I guess that was my circle of friends were people who were a <i>little rebellious</i> probably and people who were just <i>more skeptical</i> in general. So, obviously, religion would be one of the first things they would walk away from.’</p>
Identity	<p>Christopher perceived himself to be introspective and intelligent:</p> <p>‘I think especially when I was a teenager, <i>I was really introspective and introverted and I lived in my head a lot</i>. As long as...that was my safe place is that I wanted things to</p>

⁴²³ This statement shows movement from belief in an abstract rational idea to its personal impact on his life.

⁴²⁴ Nominal Christianity – ‘presume it’s true but never really think about it or practice it. It’s just something you assume’ – a default position – ‘easy to walk away from’, particularly if you’re a rebellious and skeptical teen.

	<p>make sense in my head. There was also an element of pride, too, <i>where my intelligence I took a lot of pride in. So, I wanted to have good answers to the questions that were naturally coming to me.</i> So, probably more than a lot of people, I spent more time thinking about those things.</p>
<p>Atheism stage</p> <p>Experience</p>	<p>Christopher described an unfavorable view of Christians:</p> <p>[Negative view of Christians and Christianity. Was that informed by particular or general observation?]</p> <p>‘It was more general. There wasn’t a specific person that I would look back on my life and say, ‘Here’s the hypocrite. That’s why I felt this way.’ But, just in general, I felt the exclusivity of Christian claims were in themselves judgmental. <i>I remember one point in high school being really turned off by Christian students who were forcibly trying to evangelize exchange students.</i> That sort of thing played in there too with the exclusivity – judgmental, intolerant, or uncaring.’</p>
<p>Sense-making Emotional</p>	<p>Christopher held strong contempt against Christianity:</p> <p>‘My journey from Atheism to Christianity came in phases. Earlier in my life, <i>I hated Christianity with an almost religious fervor. I abhorred (real and perceived) hypocrisy and judgmentalism in Christians. I found Christian moral constraints both untrue and subjectively repulsive</i>’.</p>
<p>Will/Desire</p>	<p>Christopher was closed towards Christianity, finding it abhorrent and repulsive (see language of contempt).</p>
<p>Purpose & Meaning</p>	<p>Atheist implications produced cognitive dissonance for him:</p> <p>[Atheistic implications. How did those affect you with regard to meaning/purpose, destiny?]</p> <p>‘Embrace is too strong of a word. It was a lingering doubt for me. I was willing to put up with it if that was the case. <i>If it turned out that the world was Dawkins’ blind pitiless indifference, then so be it, but I wouldn’t say necessarily that I embraced that. It clashed with my intuitions about the world. So, that was always a source of cognitive dissonance for me</i>⁴²⁵.</p> <p>I probably thought on the whole that there was better evidence for there not being a God than for there being a God, but if you would’ve asked me about some of those worldview implications, I would’ve said, ‘Look. We don’t have any good answers here.’’</p>
<p>Sense-making Intellectual</p>	<p>Although Christopher grew up with a general belief in God and Jesus, he began to question its truth as a teenager (‘the answers weren’t really there’):</p> <p>‘I grew up in a more or less irreligious household. My mom came from a Pentecostal background and my father came from a Catholic background, but neither of them</p>

⁴²⁵ Description of cognitive dissonance – living with ‘blind pitiless indifference’ ‘clashed with his intuitions about the world’.

	<p>retained the religion of their parents so <i>religion wasn't really part of our house...</i> I guess as a younger child, I took for granted, 'yea, there's probably some kind of God.' I had heard about Jesus through Bible stories and more or less assumed that's true but it had never become an ingrained part of our family structure. When I became a teenager, <i>I began to question and began seeking out answers to more difficult questions, the answers weren't really there.'</i></p> <p>'So when I became a teenager, I began to question and began seeking out answers to more difficult questions, the answers weren't really there. And, like I said, we were going here and there to <i>church</i>. <i>And, they didn't give very compelling answers to any of the questions that I would ask</i>. So, I guess that's what really led me to question whether it was true or not. And, in addition to that, there's the emotional aspect of perceiving hypocrisy in the church as well, and that was also a driving force.'⁴²⁶</p>
Canonical Text	<p>Christopher had some general knowledge about bible stories and Jesus:</p> <p>'I had heard about Jesus through Bible stories and more or less assumed 'that's true' but it had never become an ingrained part of our family structure.'</p>
Spiritual	<p>Christopher grew up in a non-religious household:</p> <p>'I grew up in a more or less irreligious household. My mom came from a Pentecostal background and my father came from a Catholic background, but neither of them retained the religion of their parents so <i>religion wasn't really part of our house...</i> I guess as a younger child, I took for granted, 'yea, there's probably some kind of God.' I had heard about Jesus through Bible stories and more or less assumed that's true but it had never become an ingrained part of our family structure. When I became a teenager, <i>I began to question and began seeking out answers to more difficult questions, the answers weren't really there.'</i></p>
LANGUAGE	CATALYST STAGE
Catalyst Stage	
Context & Community	<p>'All of my friends were violently anti-Christian and so to even say, 'Hey, I watched this debate and I think this guy won' meant being ostracized. I mean even in the most dispassionate, detached...even if I thought Christianity was patently false and so say, 'Hey, I think Dr. Craig won this debate' <i>you would just be scorned</i> because people couldn't, weren't prepared to even think in those terms. <i>They couldn't listen to the debate and even think about it rationally. It was just 'Christianity isn't true. I hate it. Shut up.'</i>⁴²⁷</p>
Identity	<p>He moved from self-identifying as 'devoutly Atheist' to becoming 'more open to spiritual things':</p> <p><i>I don't know what I would've called myself. I probably would've refused any one-word label at that point. But, I, at some point shifted from being devoutly Atheist to being</i></p>

⁴²⁶ Although Christopher started with a nominal belief, it was shattered by the lack of those in the church to answer his questions or to live out their faith with integrity.

⁴²⁷ His friends: skeptical, rebellious, 'violently anti-Christian' who scorn anyone who even entertains a positive idea of Christianity.

	<p><i>more open to spiritual or supernatural things outside of the box. That made a little more sense out of things like the problem of the origination of intelligence and life, that sort of thing, that maybe there was an answer to the moral argument out there.'</i></p> <p>In considering Christianity, he did not want to see himself as a 'sinner who needed forgiveness' because of his own pride:</p> <p><i>'But, at the same time, belief that I was a sinner, that I needed forgiveness and needed to repent was a really tough idea for me to work through. I felt like I had spent so much of my life over the past couple of years hearing incessantly that 'Everything is okay, do what you want, this is okay, that's okay.'"</i></p> <p><i>'So to have all of a sudden both an internal and external source, because my own conscience was starting to change, and then also reading through the Bible, having internal and external confirmation that that wasn't the case was really jarring for me. It wasn't necessarily attractive either even with the offer of forgiveness attached to it. It was hard to see myself in that light. I had a lot of pride and didn't want to see myself in that light. I didn't want to think I had done things wrong and I didn't want to think that I had sinned and needed forgiveness. So, that was really a tough adaptation for me.'</i></p>
Catalyst Stage Experience	<p>Christopher had no direct experience with Christians during this period.</p>
Sense-making Emotional	<p>He became open to spirituality, but not Christianity:</p> <p><i>'Over time, my Atheism softened and I became more interested in and accepting of spirituality in general. I researched Buddhism, Wicca, and various forms of New Age spirituality. I did not subscribe to any of them, but I was intrigued and more or less open.'</i></p> <p>He became interested in Christianity, but experienced emotional dissonance:</p> <p><i>'I still struggled at that point, not emotionally being attracted to Christianity but it was rising as the most intellectually viable option. So, that was discordant for me.</i></p> <p><i>Obviously, it was attractive that I was intentionally made by an intelligent agent and that I had a purpose, that life had a purpose and that things weren't completely random. And so all of that was emotionally appealing to me. But, at the same time, belief that I was a sinner, that I needed forgiveness and needed to repent was a really tough idea for me to work through. I felt like I had spent so much of my life over the past couple of years hearing incessantly that 'Everything is okay, do what you want, this is okay, that's okay.'⁴²⁸</i></p> <p><i>So to have all of a sudden both an internal and external source, because my own conscience was starting to change, and then also reading through the Bible, having internal and external confirmation that that wasn't the case was really jarring for me. It wasn't necessarily attractive either even with the offer of forgiveness attached to it. It was hard to see myself in that light. I had a lot of pride and didn't want to see myself in that light. I didn't want to think I had done things wrong and I didn't want to think</i></p>

⁴²⁸ Christianity offered things both emotionally appealing (purpose/meaning/value) yet emotionally distasteful (see self as a sinner in need of forgiveness). It was a 'tough adaptation' to see himself in a new, more sobered way.

	<i>that I had sinned and needed forgiveness. So, that was really a tough adaptation for me.'</i>
Will/Desire	<p><i>'Over time, my Atheism softened and I became more interested in and accepting of spirituality in general. I researched Buddhism, Wicca, and various forms of New Age spirituality. I did not subscribe to any of them, but I was intrigued and more or less open. I also began to consider that Christianity was more complex than I once held: it was both a force for good as well as a force of ignorance and oppression in our society.'</i></p> <p><i>'During this time, I was strongly searching for answers to the question of moral grounding and objective value. Atheism provided unsatisfying and hopelessly contradictory answers, which is one of the reasons I became open to various forms of spirituality. I became more seriously interested in Christianity through watching debates online, particularly William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, and Ravi Zacharias.'</i></p>
Catalyst Stage Purpose & Meaning	<p>Existential aspects of Christianity were emotionally appealing to him:</p> <p><i>'Obviously, it was attractive that I was intentionally made by an intelligent agent and that I had a purpose, that life had a purpose and that things weren't completely random. And so all of that was emotionally appealing to me.'</i>⁴²⁹</p>
Sense-making Intellectual	<p>As a contemplative Atheist, Christopher saw negative implications to his own worldview (e.g., inability to ground objective morality), causing him to become open towards intellectual consideration of other ideologies:</p> <p><i>'During this time, I was strongly searching for answers to the question of moral grounding and objective value. Atheism provided unsatisfying and hopelessly contradictory answers, which is one of the reasons I became open to various forms of spirituality. I became more seriously interested in Christianity through watching debates online, particularly William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, and Ravi Zacharias.'</i></p> <p>Once open to spirituality, Christopher began researching other religions but did not find them to provide substantive answers:</p> <p><i>[what did you find any answers to those questions in these other worldviews, any answers that were substantive?] 'Not really. They didn't seem substantive at all. They seemed shallow, particularly Buddhism and New Age seemed really soft and unthoughtful. And, they seemed to not have better answers to some of the moral questions. Even, for example, Buddhists often prescribe compassion and mercy but that didn't necessarily cohere with either Atheistic Buddhism, which again has the same problem as naturalism really in terms of grounding moral values and duties. And, I also thought they didn't cohere with other Buddhist teachings about the nature of desire and desire being the cause of suffering. So, I wasn't finding very good answers there either.'</i>⁴³⁰</p> <p>From there he began to search religions who made historical claims and invite investigation, at the Abrahamic faiths:</p>

⁴²⁹ Even as an Atheist, Christianity offered purpose/meaning that was emotionally appealing to him.

⁴³⁰ Christopher's contemplative, investigative nature is clear here – viewing other worldviews in terms of their intellectual integrity and ability to explain reality.

	<p>'In terms of interacting with history, it's really one of the very few religions that even cares about history. There are few religions that even make historical claims, period - never mind that invites historical investigation and then passes it! You're looking at the Abrahamic religions and Mormonism and other spin-off cults, but religion doesn't intersect with history in terms of its claims. So, once I came to understand that, I started to think, 'Well ok, if there is anywhere to look for answers, this is the place to look. If I don't find them here, then whatever, I guess they're just not out there.'⁴³¹</p> <p>He further considered and was convinced by the Christian worldview because Atheism was unable to provide cogent grounding for objective morals and values, causing cognitive dissonance:</p> <p>'I also began to consider that Christianity was more complex than I once held: it was both a force for good as well as a force of ignorance and oppression in our society. During this time, <i>I was strongly searching for answers to the question of moral grounding and objective value. Atheism provided unsatisfying and hopelessly contradictory answers, which is one of the reasons I became open to various forms of spirituality.</i></p> <p>Christopher began to watch debates and read books which proved intellectually convincing for that Christianity was 'probably true':</p> <p>'I became more seriously interested in Christianity through watching debates online, particularly William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, and Ravi Zacharias. Their debates and lectures seemed eminently reasonable, and it seemed clear to me that they trounced their opponents in every debate (albeit graciously). Still, I was only convinced that Christianity was more or less reasonable, not that it was actually true. I read a few more books on the subject (<i>The Case for Christ</i> and some more technical books by F.F. Bruce) and began <i>gradually to believe Christianity was probably true.</i>⁴³²</p> <p>'I guess the game changer was reading Lee Strobel's <i>Case for Christ</i>. It opened up different streams of evidence to be thinking about. It's a relatively easy read and not necessarily super deep so there's a good breadth to it that I didn't know that there were different arguments to be made, so that was a good introduction to a more fully developed apologetic. So, reading that sort of begrudgingly, and I got into it because he's a good narrative writer. <i>By the time I finished that book, I was thinking that there are potentially good answers out here. I'm interested in pursuing this more.'</i></p>
<p>Catalyst Stage</p> <p>Canonical Text</p>	<p>When he began reading the bible, Christopher read it critically but with an emotional draw towards Jesus and the epistles:</p> <p>[When you were reading the Bible, you were open to the person of Jesus. Were you reading the Bible also with a skeptical or critical eye?]</p> <p>Apart from Jesus and the Gospels, I had a critical eye towards everything else. And it was pretty easy for me to almost dismiss the Old Testament out of hand. I didn't know how to necessarily reconcile that. I thought there was a disconnect between what I am reading in the Torah and what I am reading in Jesus. Maybe to some extent I felt there was even a disconnect in reading the epistles because I wasn't having that same kind of emotional draw. <i>The emotional draw that I was having was very much towards</i></p>

⁴³¹ Christopher's conversion process took an intentional intellectual journey towards looking at their evidential viability.

⁴³² Statement here of movement from possibility to probability of Christianity being true.

	<p><i>the person of Jesus</i> and the epistles at that point didn't even make any sense to me. The Old Testament seemed to be outdated and barbaric. So, it was a tough place, making sense of all of those things.⁴³³</p> <p>Reading through the bible, he found himself 'in the text' as a sinner:</p> <p>But, at the same time, belief that I was a sinner, that I needed forgiveness and needed to repent was a really tough idea for me to work through. I felt like I had spent so much of my life over the past couple of years hearing incessantly that 'Everything is okay, do what you want, this is okay, that's okay.' So to have all of a sudden both an internal and external source, because my own conscience was starting to change, and then also reading through the Bible, having internal and external confirmation that that wasn't the case was really jarring for me. It wasn't necessarily attractive either even with the offer of forgiveness attached to it. It was hard to see myself in that light. I had a lot of pride and didn't want to see myself in that light. I didn't want to think I had done things wrong and I didn't want to think that I had sinned and needed forgiveness. So, that was really a tough adaptation for me.⁴³⁴</p> <p>Christopher also describes encountering a spiritual experience when he was first reading the bible, particularly reading about the person of Jesus. (See CAT Spiritual)</p>
<p>Catalyst Stage</p> <p>Spiritual</p>	<p>At some point he began to become more open towards spirituality generally, but refused to consider Christianity:</p> <p><i>'Over time, my Atheism softened and I became more interested in and accepting of spirituality in general. I researched Buddhism, Wicca, and various forms of New Age spirituality.' 'I was vaguely interested in what you would call spirituality and I read a lot of books in New Age and Buddhism and stuff like that. I was not even at that point willing to even consider Christianity as an option. I couldn't put my finger necessarily on a strong reason why other than I just knew, 'it's not that.' Of all of the possible options out there, it's certainly not that.'</i>⁴³⁵</p> <p>He began researching historically based (Abrahamic) faiths and reading the bible:</p> <p>Obviously, it was attractive that I was intentionally made by an intelligent agent and that I had a purpose, that life had a purpose and that things weren't completely random. And so all of that was emotionally appealing to me. But, at the same time, <i>belief that I was a sinner, that I needed forgiveness and needed to repent was a really tough idea for me to work through.</i> (see CAT Sense-making emotional)</p> <p>[You mentioned that you responded to a religious/mystical experience. Did you have a particular experience that occurred over and above your intellectual seeking?]</p> <p><i>'I guess it was, it wasn't like a vision or anything like that but I was really feeling so strongly drawn to the character of Jesus and that was, it hard to explain they discord</i></p>

⁴³³ Again, Christopher is able to verbalize the distinction between intellectual belief and 'emotional draw' in reading the text. His admission of lack of understanding demonstrates his transparency.

⁴³⁴ This is a good example of 'finding yourself in the text'. Christianity is not merely a comfortable book per se. It takes someone to difficult and uncomfortable realizations and demands of humble recognition, of self-sacrifice for others, etc.

⁴³⁵ He expressed his strong aversion to Christianity ('I just knew 'it's not that'. Of all of the possible options out there, it's certainly not that.'

	<p>in my mind but I was thinking that Christianity is probably true <i>being strongly, supernaturally, powerfully attracted to the person of Jesus but somehow still hating Christianity</i>. I know it doesn't make a lot of sense to say these things in concert but that is the discord that was going on in my mind and heart there.</p> <p><i>And the spiritual experience is when I would read or think anything about Jesus. And I just remember reading the Bible and literally shaking when I read the gospels because I just could not that there is a person like this, that this person was God, and that this person cared for me. Even though I wasn't necessarily willing to jump in full boar at that point, that was like a draw on my heart that I felt needed an answer.'</i>⁴³⁶</p>
LANGUAGE	CONVERSION STAGE
<p>Conversion Stage</p> <p>Context & Community</p>	<p>Christopher's conversion was independent, apart from a Christian community (except for his Atheist roommate who came to belief at the same time):</p> <p>[So, did you keep it to yourself, other than have meaningful discussions with your roommate? Was it an independent search?]</p> <p>'Yes, it was more or less <i>independent between the two of us</i> until the time when we converted, and that in my mind is a really murky timeline. It's not really clear. I think I became intellectually convinced that it was true before I surrendered to it emotionally, spiritually.⁴³⁷ So the timeline on that isn't necessarily clear in my own mind, when I came to an idea on this, when I came to an idea on that. But, <i>that was all was pretty much internal and independent. Until it reached a tipping point when all of a sudden I guess we said we are Christians now, they're not going to like us anymore.</i>⁴³⁸</p> <p>'I finally went to church one morning, <i>expecting to hate it and have my apprehensions confirmed, and the love and grace of the congregation, coupled with the brilliance of the sermon, crushed my defenses.</i>⁴³⁹</p> <p>Christopher's conversion was a 'slow work'. Although he considered himself a Christian, he understood changing his heart, mind, and worldview was over a period of time:</p> <p>[You had positioned yourself, going to church, willing to put yourself in a situation where in some ways you were affirming the truth of Christianity by going through some motions.]</p> <p><i>'I think at that point I believed it. If you want to speak more spiritually, I was saved at that point, but it was a slow work, heart and mind, to actually change my worldview.'</i></p>

⁴³⁶ Clarifying comment regarding the struggle through conversion – 'strongly attracted to Jesus' but 'still hating Christianity'. Also interesting statement regarding the compelling nature of reading or thinking about Jesus as a 'spiritual experience', causing him to physically shake.

⁴³⁷ Christopher emphasized the 'internal' and 'independent' nature of his conversion.

⁴³⁸ He knew his conversion would cause dissention between him and his social group.

⁴³⁹ His negative expectations were completely disarmed by the love and grace shown by the people in the church as well as the 'brilliance' of the sermon.

	<p>[How did you finally come to that place of being able to lay down your pride and surrender?]</p> <p>That's a good question. It's also really cloudy in my mind in terms of when that actually happened. <i>I feel like I might have been going to church for months before that happened.</i> I don't know at what point I really felt comfortable with that idea and I must have been really slowly accepting little pieces, 'Ok, I did this wrong. Ok, I did this wrong.' It wasn't at once that my whole worldview changed with regard to sin and repentance. That wasn't the case for me. It was a much slower, gradual process for me.⁴⁴⁰</p>
Identity	'We said we are Christians now. '
Experience	
Sense-making Emotional	
Will/Desire	
Purpose & Meaning	
Sense-making Intellectual	<p>Christopher accepted Christianity as worthy of belief and became a Christian:</p> <p>'I mean by that point I was like, 'Okay I'm in this, I looked through this and <i>Christianity is offering the only answers that are even close to coherent.</i>'</p>
Canonical Text	
Spiritual	<p>After Christopher became intellectually convinced of the truth of Christianity, he 'surrendered to it emotionally, spiritually':</p> <p>'Yes, it was more or less <i>independent between the two of us</i> [my roommate] until the time <i>when we converted</i>, and that in my mind is a really murky timeline. It's not really clear. <i>I think I became intellectually convinced that it was true before I surrendered to it emotionally, spiritually.</i>'⁴⁴¹</p>
LANGUAGE	POST-CONVERSION STAGE
Post-Conversion Stage	<p>After he became a Christian, he lost many friends:</p> <p>[What happened with your group of friends when they found out?]</p>

⁴⁴⁰ Post-conversion, the process of 'becoming a Christian' with an integrated understanding and living is a 'gradual process'

⁴⁴¹ Again, here is a nice example of different components coming together for conversion – intellect, emotionality, spirituality.

Context & Community	<p><i>We lost a lot of friends, honestly.</i> Even then our beliefs were very liberal and in some sense more closely aligned with Atheism than with Christianity on all sorts of issues. <i>But just saying, ‘we’re going to church this Sunday,’ or ‘Jesus is God,’ a lot of people hated us.</i> I can remember that, just feeling really crappy that friends wouldn’t even talk to us anymore because of that.</p> <p>[That must have been difficult.] Yes, it was difficult, and I think also though, there’s kind of a new conversion joy that helped to get us through it. I had a pretty strong sense of peace about it considering how crappy it was. I mean by that point I was like, ‘Okay I’m in this, I looked through this and Christianity is offering the only answers that are even close to coherent.’ <i>I felt a lot of peace about that even though at the same time it was really crappy losing a bunch of friends.</i>⁴⁴²</p>
Identity	
Experience	
Sense-making Emotional	<p>Despite his loss of friends due to becoming a Christian, Christopher expressed emotional joy and peace in his decision:</p> <p>[That must have been difficult.] ‘Yes, it was difficult, and I think also though, there’s kind of a new conversion joy that helped to get us through it. I had a pretty strong sense of peace about it considering how crappy it was. I mean by that point I was like, ‘Okay I’m in this, I looked through this and Christianity is offering the only answers that are even close to coherent.’ <i>I felt a lot of peace about that even though at the same time it was really crappy losing a bunch of friends.</i>’⁴⁴³</p>
Will/Desire	
Purpose & Meaning	<p>After conversion, Christian’s life purpose and direction completely changed:</p> <p>At the time of the interview, Christopher was moderating an online international apologetics academy to help others learn about the grounding for the Christian worldview. He worked as communications director at a private Christian school and was studying the life of C.S. Lewis at the academic level.</p>
Sense-making Intellectual	<p>After conversion, he attempted to enter into intellectual discussions regarding ‘big questions’ but found ‘blind uncritical thinking’:</p> <p>‘I remember having a lot of conversations with Atheist friends and it was similar to a lot of Christian conversations where I felt that they weren’t taking the questions seriously enough. That’s especially true with the moral argument where a lot of people would even claim to embrace moral relativism but you couldn’t even finish a</p>

⁴⁴² This is an example of someone losing rather than gaining immediate social benefit by converting to Christianity.

⁴⁴³ Interesting juxtaposition of emotional loss of close friends yet the gain of ‘conversion joy’ and a ‘strong sense of peace’ in his conversion

	<p>conversation before they were contradicting themselves. They would say, ‘this is wrong. That’s wrong.’ I could never make any headway with them and they would just blindly say, ‘Oh, yeah, it’s all relative.’ And, the very next sentence contradict themselves and they wouldn’t even understand that it was a contradiction. That was just the same kind of blind uncritical thinking that I had perceived among Christians. That was frightening for me. <i>No one was thinking about the questions.</i>⁴⁴⁴</p> <p>[Why do you suppose people don’t want to be thoughtful about their beliefs?]</p> <p><i>It is a tumultuous thing to change your entire worldview. It’s like stepping into another world because the way that you perceive everything changes. So, I understand why people are reluctant about wanting to switch their worldview one way or the other. If you go from believing that there’s no objective moral duties to believing that there are these duties binding upon you then <i>that’s an enormous shift in the way that you think about everything you do or say or think.</i> To go in another direction, I understand that people are cautious about even consider something that might potentially change their life that much.</i>⁴⁴⁵</p>
Canonical Text	<p>Christopher grew in his knowledge of the bible, Christian history, and Christian apologetics through intentional study:</p> <p>[So it was a process overtime, like you say, even looking at the Bible in a way that cohered with the person of Christ and the grander narrative?] [You’ve obviously grown a great deal in your knowledge and your understanding in your faith. How did that happen?]</p> <p>Partially, I’m inquisitive by nature. Also, I really felt I needed to have good answers. So, again, it was internal and external forces that made me want to read up a lot about these things. So I started reading more books about church history, philosophy, different apologetic arguments just for my own satisfaction; and, also, so I could hold my own in debates with <i>people who were really violently against me.</i>⁴⁴⁶</p>
Spiritual	
BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION	
Narrative Embodied	
Context & Community	<p>BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION – Context and Community</p> <p>□ ‘I Atheist’ to ‘I Christian’ shift in moving from autonomous Atheism (non-active in Atheist community) to isolated Christian living (non-active in Christian community).</p>

⁴⁴⁴ Because Christopher approaches his faith with critical thinking, he finds it disturbing that many do not – both Atheists and Christians.

⁴⁴⁵ Good description on the grand life change associated with conversion.

⁴⁴⁶ Here Christopher talks about the difficult challenges he faces as a Christian, particularly in debates with ‘people who were really violent against me’.

	<p>Or</p> <p>□ ‘I Atheist’ to ‘We Christians’ shift in moving from autonomous Atheism (non-active in Atheist community) to desire for intentional community with Christians.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>⊗ ‘We Atheists’ to ‘We Christians’ shift: Movement from personal involvement in or influence from Atheist community to becoming an active part of Christian community.⁴⁴⁷</p>
Identity	<p>BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION - Identity:</p> <p>⊗ ‘I/We’ to ‘More than I/We’ shift: Primary identity shifts from independent self (‘I’) or within community of Atheists (‘We’) moving to primary identity focus as a Christian within a believing community yet transcending the individual and/or group (‘More than we’).⁴⁴⁸</p> <p>and</p> <p>⊗ ‘Heightened self’ to ‘Humbled self’ shift in considering self and others: Movement from self-perceived heightened sense of self and/or superiority over religious persons towards a more humbled self-perspective and perception through Conversion Stages.⁴⁴⁹</p>
Experience	<p>□ ‘Unfavorable’ to ‘Favorable’ shift in personal life experience pre/post conversion: Movement from perceived negative pre-conversion life experience to positive life experience through and/or after conversion.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>⊗ ‘Favorable’ to ‘More favorable’ shift in personal life experience: The individual reported increasingly positive life experiences throughout stages of conversion.⁴⁵⁰</p> <p>And</p> <p>⊗ ‘Unfavorable’ to ‘Favorable’ shift in experience with Christians: Movement from perceived negative or mixed experiences with Christians to describing more positive experiences with Christians through progression of and beyond conversion.⁴⁵¹</p> <p>Or</p>

⁴⁴⁷ Christopher moved from a strongly anti-theist community when becoming a Christian. He lost his prior social group through conversion but became an active part of the Christian community. His felt loss was replaced with ‘conversion joy and peace’.

⁴⁴⁸ Christopher moved from his ‘devout Atheist’ identity to becoming part of a community of Christians.

⁴⁴⁹ Christopher moved from ‘taking a lot of pride in his intelligence as a devout Atheist’, repulsed at Christians because of hypocrisy, not wanting to see himself as a sinner in need of forgiveness to becoming ‘one of them’

⁴⁵⁰ Christopher did not describe a negative life experience pre-conversion.

⁴⁵¹ Christopher moved from a general negative perception of Christians as exclusive, judgmental, intolerant and uncaring to becoming part of Christian community

	<p>□ ‘Favorable’ to ‘More favorable’ shift in experience with Christians: The individual spoke of neutral and/or increasingly positive experience with Christians throughout stages of belief change.</p>
Sense-making Emotional	<p>BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION – Sense Making Emotional</p> <p>⊗ ‘Anger/Contempt’ to ‘Resolution’ shift: Movement from emotional anger towards people, life events, God and/or Christians towards emotional peace and in the goodness, forgiveness, and reality of God (and the brokenness of the world) through a Christian perspective.⁴⁵²</p> <p>or</p> <p>□ ‘Non-angry Atheist’ to ‘Christian’: The individual described neutral and/or positive emotions throughout the stages of belief change.</p>
Will/Desire	<p>BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION – Will/Desire:</p> <p>⊗ ‘Closed’ to ‘Open’ shift: Movement from experiential, emotional, volitional and/or intellectual resistance to God and/or Christians towards openness regarding the reality and goodness of God and/or Christians.⁴⁵³</p> <p>Or</p> <p>□ ‘Open’ to ‘More open’ shift: The individual reported and/or demonstrated an open, increasing willingness towards alternative belief potentiality throughout stages of belief.</p>
Purpose & Meaning	<p>BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION– Purpose and Meaning</p> <p>⊗ ‘Emptiness’ to ‘Satisfaction’ shift: Movement from existential emptiness towards joy, satisfaction, meaning and ‘other-directed’ life purposes in God.⁴⁵⁴</p> <p>And/or</p> <p>⊗ ‘My will’ to ‘God’s will’ shift: Movement from self-centered purposes (‘my will’) towards God’s ultimate purposes (‘God’s will’).⁴⁵⁵</p>

⁴⁵² Christopher described a variety of emotions in moving from Atheism (holding strong contempt for Christians, emotional dissatisfaction within his own worldview) to openness and interest in spirituality to becoming intellectually but not emotionally interested in Christianity, and finally experiencing the emotional loss of friendships yet the gain of peace and joy through his conversion to Christianity.

⁴⁵³ Christopher moved from holding great animosity towards Christians to becoming open to spirituality after contemplating the implications of the Atheistic worldview; finally, he became open towards investigating historic religions and finally Christianity. Once believing in the truth of Christianity, it was a process to become open personally, emotionally and spiritually towards conversion.

⁴⁵⁴ Christopher’s life moved from a discontent from objective purposelessness implied through Atheism to living life of God-directed purpose and meaning.

⁴⁵⁵ Christopher moved from self-directed purposes to God’s will and purpose. At the time of the interview, he was leading online apologetics discussions through an international apologetics ministry and was employed at a Christian school.

	<p>or</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No clear shift in purpose/meaning: The individual's felt satisfaction and/or life purposes did not appear to change</p>
Sense-making Intellectual	<p>BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION – Sense Making Intellect</p> <p>⊗ 'Conflict' to 'Resolution' shift in moving from cognitive dissonance towards resolution: Movement from cognitive dissonance regarding Atheism as insufficient to ground understanding and experience of reality. Cognitive dissonance precipitates quest for sense-making towards resolution as a catalyst towards conversion. Cognitive dissonance also precipitates ongoing intellectual sense-making post-conversion towards resolution.⁴⁵⁶</p> <p>And/or</p> <p>⊗ 'Uninformed' to 'Informed' shift in moving from Atheism to Christianity: Movement from rejection of God and Christianity from a self-considered 'uninformed' perspective towards belief in God and Christianity as the best explanation for reality from an 'informed' perspective. This shift can occur prior to or after conversion. This form of questing is driven by desire for knowledge and understanding more than cognitive dissonance.⁴⁵⁷</p> <p>Or</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> 'Uninformed' to 'Uninformed' shift in moving from Atheism to Christianity: Sense-making intellectual did not appear to influence stages of conversion.</p>
Canonical Text	<p>BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION – Canonical Text</p> <p>⊗ 'Reading the text' to 'Text reading me' shift: Movement from reading the text as a source of information to determine its truth to seeing the bible as a credible source requiring personal response and transformation.⁴⁵⁸</p> <p>and</p> <p>⊗ 'Outside the text' to 'Inside the text' shift: Movement from distinctly standing apart from the Christian worldview and biblical text to seeing self as part of the canonical story - not only in personal identity, value, purposes, and salvation, but also in the grand narrative and salvific purposes of God through the church.⁴⁵⁹</p> <p>Or</p>

⁴⁵⁶ An introspective contemplative, Christopher realized the implications of the Atheistic worldview. Dissatisfied with its inability to ground objective morals, he became open to investigating spirituality and eventually came to believe Christianity as providing the 'most coherent answers' to his questions.

⁴⁵⁷ Christopher moved from lack of knowledge about spirituality towards questing after other worldviews that proved to be considered as intellectually 'soft and unthoughtful'. Finally, Christopher began intellectually investigating historical and substantive grounding of Christianity, becoming convinced of its truth.

⁴⁵⁸ Christopher moved from reading the text as an 'outsider' investigating its claims to being read by the text, seeing himself as a sinner in need of salvation.

⁴⁵⁹ Christopher moved from viewing the Christian story as a skeptical outsider to becoming someone who is living, defending, and promoting the Christian narrative as true and worthy of belief.

	<p><input type="checkbox"/> No clear shift in Canonical Text: The bible or other religious texts did not appear to play a remarkable role in the stages of conversion.</p>
Spiritual	<p>BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION – Spiritual Reality</p> <p>⊗ ‘Denial of God’ to ‘Belief in God’ shift through spiritual experience: Movement from denial of the Judeo-Christian God towards openness and belief in God’s existence through described spiritual experience pre-conversion, during conversion or post-conversion.⁴⁶⁰</p> <p>Or</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> ‘Denial of God’ to ‘belief in God’ shift without spiritual experience: Spiritual experience was not described as an influential component of religious conversion to Christianity.</p>
Narrative Reflected	
Etic Summary Sep 2014	<p>Substance primary (intellectual) Functional - secondary (emotional resistance; social loss)</p> <p>Themes towards Atheism/closed: Spiritual/Social: nominal background;</p> <p>Intellectual: Atheist after questioning but given no adequate answers; thoughtful, introverted, introspective personality</p> <p>Emotional/Existential: repulsed by hypocrisy among Christians; personal general rebellion against authority; negative view of Christians</p> <p>Themes toward seeking/openness:</p> <p>Intellectual: After high school, began to sense intellectual lack of grounding for Atheistic worldview, particularly regarding objective morality, origin of life issues.</p> <p>Spiritual: Due to ineptness of the Atheistic worldview, began searching viability of non-Christian spiritual worldviews and found them to be inept as well.</p> <p>Social: Atheistic college roommate also began considering other worldviews, Christianity.</p> <p>Intellectual: began watching television programs discussion worldview issues, watching debates with Christian scholars, reading apologetics materials which proved to be more substantive than anticipated; after study, discussion regarding his objections, he eventually came to believe that the weight of the evidence supports Christianity.</p> <p>Existential: even though he came to a place of intellectual belief in the truth of the Christian worldview, he had to come to terms with holistic demands of the Christian life before he was willing to become a Christian.</p> <p>Social: Lost Atheistic friends.</p>

⁴⁶⁰ Christopher moved from stark disbelief in God to becoming ‘supernaturally drawn’ to the person of Jesus while reading the bible. He characterized this as a compelling spiritual experience.

	<p>Role of substance: Substantive (intellectual) confirmation before and after conversion; apologetics/substance of faith, issues of truth important to answer questions, provide coherent, grounded worldview.</p> <p>Role of function: Social/experiential: Atheistic roommate on same intellectual journey, although Christopher mostly pursued truth independently. (Painfully) moved away from social group/belonging in order to embrace what he knew to be true.</p>			
Substance Catalyst				
S1 (3/50) 06.0%		SI high SE low F low	SI high SE low/high (i) F low/high	SI+
Christopher strong Atheist age of Atheism: 18 age of conversion: 22 US; male	F soc mor SI no answers	SI lack in Atheism: objective morality origin of universe	SI non-Christian F soc roommate searching SI apologetics and church; belief but not conversion; F exp church broke stereotype SE(i) moral culpability	SI confirmation; apologetics ministry
Etic Perspective July 2018	<p>BIOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION REFLEXIVE COMMENTS</p> <p>These stories often reveal surprising, dramatic changes in someone's life, moving from strong resistance to strong acceptance and advocating of a new worldview and life perspective. Community is strong, but not strong enough to prevail over truth when someone is driven to find answers which best satisfy.</p> <p>Christopher is an introspective person by nature, driven by life's big questions. As an Atheist, he 'hated' Christianity, 'abhorred' Christian hypocrisy, was 'repulsed' by Christian moral constraints. Over time, his search to find answers to the grounding for objective morals and duties led him to reject Atheism and other forms of spirituality and religion, finding Christianity as the only reasonable option. So, he came to Christianity reluctantly, but was 'emotionally and spiritually drawn' to the person of Jesus when reading the bible and found himself in the biblical narrative as a sinner in need of salvation.</p> <p>His own self-reflection, honesty, and pursuit of truth led him towards a reluctant acceptance of Christianity. He was willing to be rejected by his closest friends (apart from his roommate) in order to live within a true, coherent worldview. He moved through this journey apart from church community or influence, searching with his roommate for answers. God became 'real' to him and he knew the path he was to walk from then on. The peace and joy he experienced post-conversion helped him through the loss of the world he once was a part.</p> <p>His honesty and pragmatic frankness were refreshing throughout the interview. He did not hold back on his relating his Atheistic perspective, his struggles against Christianity, his resistance to move in that direction and the difficult process of moving from one worldview to another.</p>			

	<p>In every story, including this one, I am impressed by someone's willingness to sacrifice comfort and familiarity and autonomy for truth, even at great expense. This kind of thoughtful introspection challenges any thoughtful listener who engages in this story.</p> <p>His once negative perception of Christians and Christianity, a caricatured perspective, also causes me to consider what precipitates this view, what changes it so much so that a highly resistant person becomes 'one of them'. His journey reveals the complexity of the interrelatedness of mind, emotion, spirit, morality, community; yet, what prevailed was his strong desire towards finding a coherent, corresponding, reasonable, 'real' explanation for reality – both externally 'out there' and internally 'in the human condition'.</p> <p>I'm also wondering as to his reported religious experience in reading about the person of Jesus in the bible. His response to Jesus seemed 'other worldly', mysterious, a heightened intimacy and wonder – an experience changing his perspective on the reality of God and Jesus.</p> <p>Each story is fresh, new, individual, and I am consistently surprised at the surprising nature of conversion.</p>
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Christopher's conversion pattern is S1, indicating a Substance primary catalyst towards conversion. His narrative reveals Function over Substance influences at the Atheist Stage, Substance over Function influences at the Catalyst Stage, Substance only influence at the Conversion Stage, and finally, both strong Function and Substance at the Post-conversion: Even though Christopher's religious conversion pattern (S1) is a 'substance dominant' profile, Christopher's combined written and interview narratives portray the integrated nature of conversion. Intellectual sense-making is present in all stages of the conversion process from pre-conversion metanarrative (Atheism) to changing metanarrative (catalyst and conversion) to post-conversion metanarrative (Christianity); and, Spiritual Experience is present at the Catalyst Stage. However, Function variables also played a substantial role in his journeying from Atheism to Christianity, except for the Conversion Stage. The naturally integrated nature of life and life change is evident through conversion in encapsulated form. The integrated nature of his conversion is observed through visual charting of his movement from Atheism to Christianity:

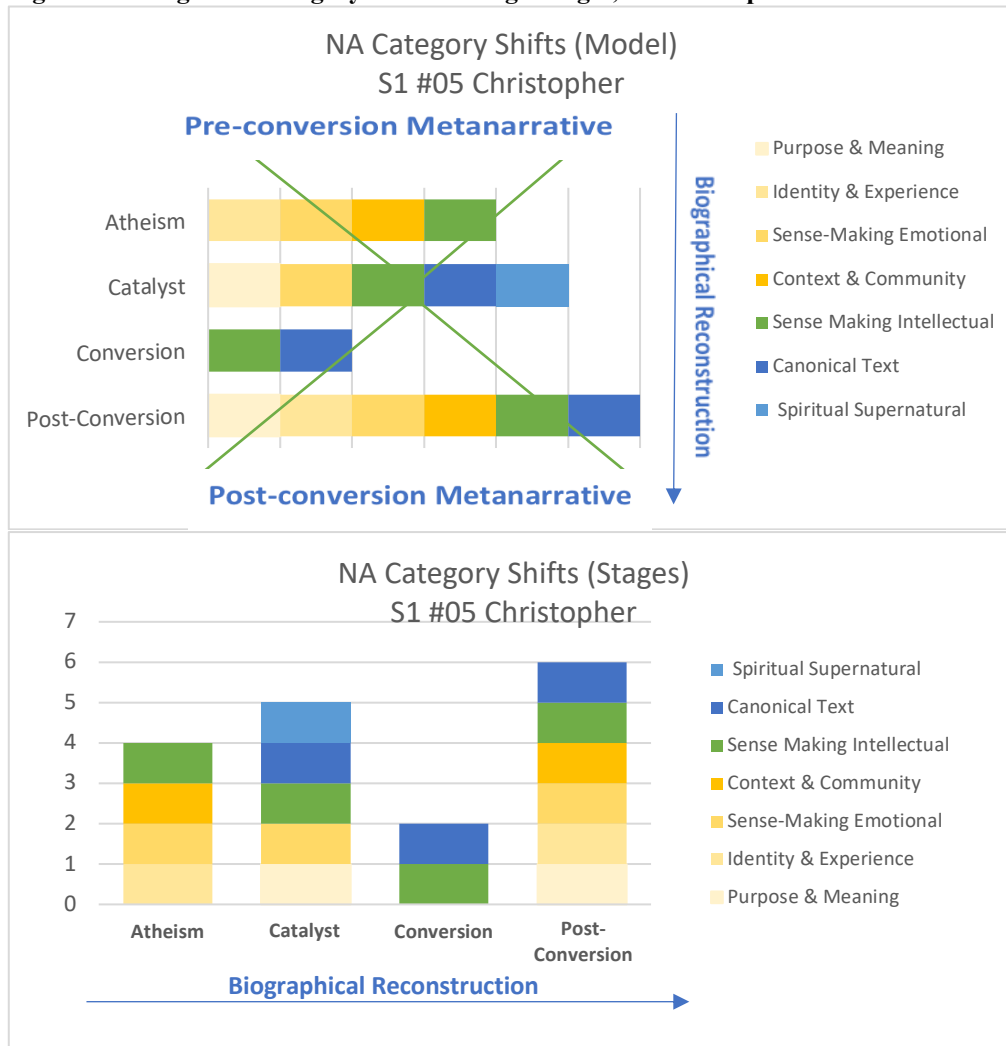
Table 92. Integrated Narrative–Category Shift Chart, S1 Christopher

	Purpose & Meaning	Identity & Experience	Emotional Sense-Making	Context & Community	Intellectual sense-making	Canonical Text	Spiritual Supernatural
Atheism	0	1	1	1	1	0	0
Catalyst	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Conversion	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Post-Conversion	1	1	0	1	1	1	0

Function variables – light to dark gold

Substance variables – green, and blue

Figure 44. Integrated Category Shifts through Stages, S1 Christopher



Christopher's thematic coded interview

[Philadelphia; Communications Director, Private Christian School; Module Moderator, RZIM Apologetics Curriculum]

[Religious/personal history]

I grew up in a more or less irreligious household. My mom came from a Pentecostal background and my father came from a Catholic background, but neither of them retained the religion of their parents so religion wasn't really part of our house. We didn't really pray together or talk about God. And we would occasionally go to church for little bouts at a time. We would go a couple of weeks here or there. But, it was never really a part of our lives. So I guess as a younger child, I took for granted, 'yea, there's probably some kind of God.' I had heard about Jesus through Bible stories and more or less assumed that's true but it had never become an ingrained part of our family structure.

So when I became a teenager, I began to question and began seeking out answers to more difficult questions, the answers weren't really there. And, like I said, we were going here and there to church. And, they didn't give very compelling answers to any of the questions that I would ask. So, I guess that's what really led me to question whether it was true or not. And, in addition to that, there's the emotional aspect of perceiving hypocrisy in the church as well, and that was also a driving force.

[Negative view of Christians and Christianity. Was that informed by particular or general observation?]

It was more general. There wasn't a specific person that I would look back on my life and say, 'Here's the hypocrite. That's why I felt this way.' But, just in general, I felt the exclusivity of Christian claims were in themselves judgmental. I remember one point in high school being really turned off by Christian students who were forceably trying to evangelize exchange students. That sort of thing played in there too with the exclusivity – judgmental, intolerant, or uncaring.

[Friends/friendships non-Christian?]

Yes, most people that I knew were like me where they grew up where Christianity was somewhere in the background and more or less it was presumed to be true, but it was never really thought about or never really practiced. It was just something that you would assume. And, I think that just the nature of it being the default position, made people who were more prone to question things a little eager to walk away from it. And, I guess that was my circle of friends were people who were a little rebellious probably and people who were just more sceptical in general. So, obviously, religion would be one of the first things they would walk away from.

[Age 14-15 common age for declaring Atheism; rebellious time generally]

Yes, you are eager for answers but also resisting authority, so you're not content with the answers you are getting, especially if they appeal to authority in the first place. It is a difficult age to be wrestling with those things.

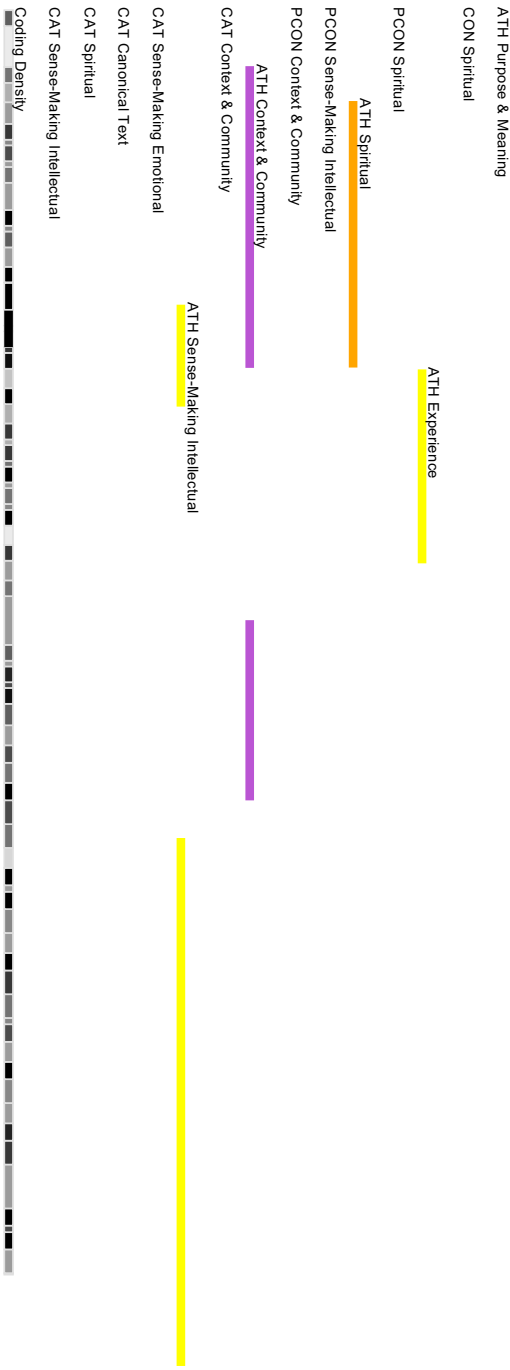
[you were convinced that God didn't exist for many reasons – hypocrisy, irreconcilability between science and faith...that religious answers didn't withstand the scrutiny of current scientific knowledge]

Yes, that was a part of it. I never really thought that there was a careful and intelligent attempt to even wrestle with this question. It was kind of just a caricatures version of faith, 'just believe it on faith,' and it was almost like a non-issue to a lot of people. It wasn't the kind of faith to be reconciled with different domains of knowledge. It was just 'shut up and have faith.'

[faith is belief without evidence or even in the faith of evidence, the Bible said it, God said it, I believe it...]

Yes, it was very unquestioning, uncritical. It was a very caricatured definition of what faith means but at least in my experience growing up there were a lot of people who held to that terrible epistemology.

[From an Atheistic perspective, there is often no sufficient evidence to prove the existence of God, whether objective or subjective. Do Atheists look at evidence or do they dismiss it carte blanche because they feel it is nonsense? How did this play out for you?]



I personally was really interested in the evidence as soon as any kind of coherent case for Christianity could be built at all. But, I didn't really encounter that until my early 20s. I didn't even know that it existed. If I had heard about the cosmological argument when I was 18 I would've been really interested in it, but I just had no idea that there was even any such thing as a coherent, or that there were good, thoughtful philosophical or empirical arguments for it.

[In your experience, you encountered that uncritical, blind faith.]

10:51:67 And I believed that just what it was. That's why it blew me away when I first encountered apologetics and learned that there were some formidable arguments out there.

[willingness to look at your own worldview; soberly embrace Atheistic perspective. Were you able to open the box and look at the bottom of Atheism and see what the implications were?]

I was cautious about that because there were a lot of tensions for me. For example, with regard to the moral aspect, I totally understood that Atheism had to entail moral relativism but that was always the tension because I believed strongly that moral relativism didn't make sense. It didn't really cohere with what I knew about the world. So, I knew that one entailed the other, and I just held out hope that maybe there was some kind of answer that I wasn't getting. But I wasn't getting good questions from either Christians or Atheists. So, I suppressed it a bit but I stood in the background and said, 'hey, this is a question I would really like an answer to.' So, I guess that was one aspect of looking at the Atheistic framework and thinking where does this logically lead me and how can I reconcile that with the rest of my worldview? I guess I was prepared to accept it but I just really didn't feel...I felt there were two things in conflict, kind of like how I felt that science and faith were in conflict.

[you also acknowledged a lack of desire or general unwillingness to believe, but then say that there is insufficient evidence. But, you report that you didn't know that certain evidences existed.]

Yes, there were spheres of evidence that I didn't know existed or even imagine existed. [Atheistic implications. How did those affect you with regard to meaning/purpose, destiny?]

Embrace is too strong of a word. It was a lingering doubt for me. I was willing to put up with it if that was the case. If it turned out that the world was Dawkins' blind pitiless indifference, then so be it, but I wouldn't say necessarily that I embraced that. It clashed with my intuitions about the world. So, that was always a source of cognitive dissonance for me. I probably thought on the whole that there was better evidence for there not being a God than for there being a God, but if you would've asked me about some of those worldview implications, I would've said, 'look. We don't have any good answers here.'

[Rated 3 on certainty of God's non-existence tells me that there were some tentative aspects to your belief, that you weren't totally convinced that it was true.]

I remember having a lot of conversations with Atheist friends and it was similar to a lot of Christian conversations where I felt that they weren't taking the questions seriously enough. That's especially true with the moral argument where a lot of people would even claim to embrace moral relativism but you couldn't even finish a conversation before they were contradicting themselves. They would say, 'this is wrong. That's wrong.' I could never make any _____ with them and they would just blindly say, 'oh, yea, it's all relative.' And, the very next sentence contradict themselves and they wouldn't even understand that it was a contradiction. That was just the same kind of blind uncritical thinking that I had perceived among Christians. That was frightening for me. No one was thinking about the questions.

[What made you such a critical thinker, so thoughtful about considering your own worldview?]

I think especially when I was a teenager, I was really introspective and introverted and I lived in my head a lot. As long as...that was my safe place is that I wanted things to make sense in my head. There was also an element of pride, too, where my intelligence I took a lot of pride in. So,

CON Spiritual	
ATH Experience	
PCON Spiritual	
ATH Spiritual	
PCON Context & Community	
ATH Context & Community	
CAT Context & Community	
ATH Sense-Making Intellectual	
CAT Sense-Making Emotional	
CAT Canonical Text	
CAT Spiritual	
CAT Sense-Making Intellectual	
Coding Density	
ATH Purpose & Meaning	
PCON Sense-Making Intellectual	

I wanted to have good answers to the questions that were naturally coming to me. So, probably more than a lot of people, I spent more time thinking about those things.

17:42. [Were there any other aspects of Atheism that caused doubts for you?]

There's another one that stands out for me which would be the origin of life, broadly. Not necessarily questioning evolution at that point, but I remember when I was about 18 reading an article by Dr. Francis Crick who discovered DNA and he was advocating panspermia and saying that life had to have been implanted on earth by aliens. And I was like 'why is this guy who discovered this stuff, why is he saying this crazy stuff?'

And as I read the article, it became obvious to me that this guy knew more than anyone what he was talking about and said it was patently impossible that DNA developed on earth. And, him being an Atheist, the only other alternative was to say it was aliens or something sounded absurd but it really peaked my interest in idea that the origin of life issue is not at all solved by modern biology. That was another area that I was interested in that I felt like if there was life, there was intelligence and information and those things didn't make sense to me on naturalism. But, that's another area where I was very much again, uncritical like the Christians, just shut up and believe. 'Evolution explains that.' 'Oh really, how does evolution explain the origin of intelligence?' That's a totally separate question. But, people wouldn't really think about it really thoughtfully I felt like.

19:40 [blind faith in science; in both sides] [Did this lack of answers prompt you to look beyond Atheism for answers? You speak of phases in your journey.]

Yes, it was very much in phases. Around that point when those questions were beginning to percolate. I was vaguely interested in what you would call spirituality and I read a lot of books in New Age and Buddhism and stuff like that. I was not even at that point willing to even consider Christianity as an option. I couldn't put my finger necessarily on a strong reason why other than I just knew, 'it's not that.' Of all of the possible options out there, it's certainly not that. I don't know what I would've called myself. I probably would've refused any one word label at that point. But, I, at some point shifted from being devoutly Atheist to being more open to spiritual or supernatural things outside of the box. That made a little more sense out of things like the problem of the origination of intelligence and life, that sort of thing, that maybe there was an answer to the moral argument out there.

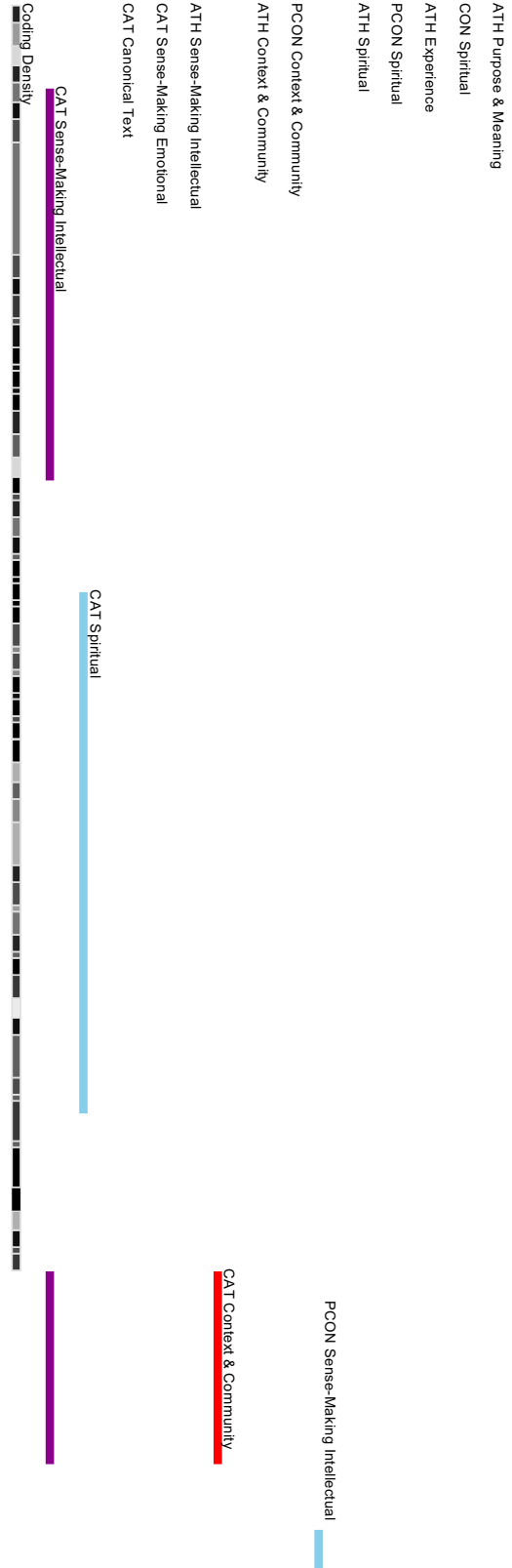
21:38 [what did you find any answers to those questions in these other worldviews, any answers that were substantive?]

Not really. They didn't seem substantive at all. They seemed shallow, particularly Buddhism and New Age seemed really soft and unthoughtful. And, they seemed to not have better answers to some of the moral questions. Even, for example, Buddhists often prescribe compassion and mercy but that didn't necessarily cohere with either Atheistic Buddhism, which again has the same problem as naturalism really in terms of grounding moral values and duties. And, I also thought they didn't cohere with other Buddhist teachings about the nature of desire and desire being the cause of suffering. So, I wasn't finding very good answers there either.

22:57 [Were you searching independently or having conversations with people who embraced these other worldviews?]

It was mostly independently because most of the conversations I was having, like I said, weren't very good. I just thought I was hitting a dead end where wherever people were on the spectrum, they weren't considering the stronger argument against their case, whatever their case was. So, at some point I gave up trying to talk with other people about these things because I figured there was no one out there...you know everyone has confirmation bias about the way they want to believe and they don't want to consider stronger opposing arguments.

23:49 [Why do you suppose people are that way, that they don't want their worldview to be challenged, to consider other perspectives, to be thoughtful about their beliefs?]



It is a tumultuous thing to change your entire worldview. It's like stepping into another world because the way that you perceive everything changes. So, I understand why people are reluctant about wanting to switch their worldview one way or the other. If you go from believing that there's no objective moral duties to believing that there are these duties binding upon you then that's an enormous shift in the way that you think about everything you do or say or think. To go in another direction, I understand that people are cautious about even consider something that might potentially change their life that much.

24:53 [It's not just changing your worldview, it is changing your whole world, right?] [Continue on with your journey...finding lack of substance in other worldviews, what's next?]

The real turning point was after seeing Gary Habermas on television. Someone that we knew was going to be on this tv show called Faith Under Fire, a short-lived show that was hosted by Lee Strobel. Someone that we knew was going to be talking about vegetarianism, so we watched it, me and my roommate at the time, just to see him. We ended up sitting through a whole show and later on, it may have been in that same show or in a different episode, we watched it intrigued and watched it the next week or something, but eventually I came across Gary Habermas. And, he was making the minimal facts case for the resurrection. That was first thing that really peaked my interest that I was like, 'wait, there's a really substantive argument here to engage with.'

From there, I looked up who Dr. Habermas was a little bit. And, my roommate at the time started to get more interested in these things coming out of that period, but we really hadn't talked about these things very in depth until this point. But, also watching that, he got into it more quickly than I did and started looking up the debates online. So, we would watch those things together. And, we would watch a bunch of debates with William Lane Craig and that kind of thing. Pretty quickly into watching those, it became super obvious to me that Dr. Craig, especially, was winning every debate he was in. So, that didn't necessarily make me think that his position was right, but it was enough to make me think that Christianity wasn't stupid. I really thought this was just an inane position and so seeing Dr. Craig just destroy everyone in debate went pretty far in just removing the obstacle in thinking that Christianity was just stupid.

And so at that point, Christianity became at least an intellectually viable option, but it was still not attractive to me for other reasons, particularly its moral teachings or whatever. So, it wasn't attractive to me at that point but at least it was intellectually viable. I saw you could be an intelligent, thoughtful person and have a faith that was rational and that there were good arguments from history and from philosophy that at least existed.

So, over the course of the next few months I got swept away, starting reading stuff. I guess my roommate was becoming more interested in it and he began really getting interested in finding answers to these questions and I was less so because at that point I was feeling like I had been through this. I had never found good answers and I decided they're just not out there. But, he was becoming more convinced at that point. And, I was on the sideline saying, 'Yeah, you know, Dr. Craig won that debate. So what? He's just a better speaker.'

29:01. I guess the game changer for that was reading Lee Strobel's *Case for Christ*. It opened up different streams of evidence to be thinking about. It's a relatively easy read and not necessarily super deep so there's a good breadth to it that I didn't know that there were different arguments to be made, so that was a good introduction to a more fully developed apologetic. So, reading that sort of begrudgingly, and I got into it because he's a good narrative writer. By the time I finished that book, I was thinking that there are potentially good answers out here. I'm interested in pursuing this more.

I still struggled at that point, not emotionally being attracted to Christianity but it was rising as the most intellectually viable option. So, that was discordant for me. I really felt like it was starting to make the most sense, these are probably the best answers I've seen. In terms of interacting with history, its really one of the very few religions that even cares about history. There are few religions that even make historical claims, period; nevermind, that invites

historical investigation and then passes it! You're looking at the Abrahamic religions and Mormonism and other spin-off cults, but religion doesn't intersect with history in terms of its claims.

So, once I came to understand that, I started to think, 'Well ok, if there is anywhere to look for answers, this is the place to look. If I don't find them here, then whatever, I guess they're just not out there.

[31:00 The layers of the onion were peeling. You were begrudgingly investigating but you couldn't deny the evidence of what you were finding.]

Yes, so that brought up a lot of those old questions. I had thought about the moral argument before but I'd never had really understood. I couldn't tell you the difference at that point between moral ontology or moral epistemology. I didn't have a good framework for thinking about it prior to engaging with it in Christian literature. So, it brought to the forefront these lingering doubts that I had about Atheism and gave me a new conceptual vocabulary through which to think about them in a more organized way. Vaguely, Atheism entails moral relativism and I couldn't really think much more comprehensively than that because I didn't really understand the concepts involved. And so, as I came to understand those concepts, it became more clear to me that a naturalistic framework was just not tenable.

[32:21 So the intellectual viability was increasing for Christianity and decreasing for naturalism/Atheism? You found yourself in that uncomfortable position, like CS Lewis.]

Yes, it was very uncomfortable internally and externally. It was uncomfortable internally for all of the reasons we mentioned about shifting your worldview and the feelings about a lot of the things in the Bible as well, not knowing what I felt about moral implications. But then in addition to that all of my friends were violently anti-Christian and so to even say, 'Hey, I watched this debate and I think this guy won' meant being ostracized. I mean even in the most dispassionate, detached...even if I thought Christianity was patently false and so say, 'hey, I think Dr. Craig won this debate' you would just be scorned because people couldn't, weren't prepared to even think in those terms. They couldn't listen to the debate and even think about it rationally. It was just 'Christianity isn't true. I hate it. Shut up.'

[33:47. So, did you keep it to yourself, other than have meaningful discussions with your roommate? Was it an independent search?]

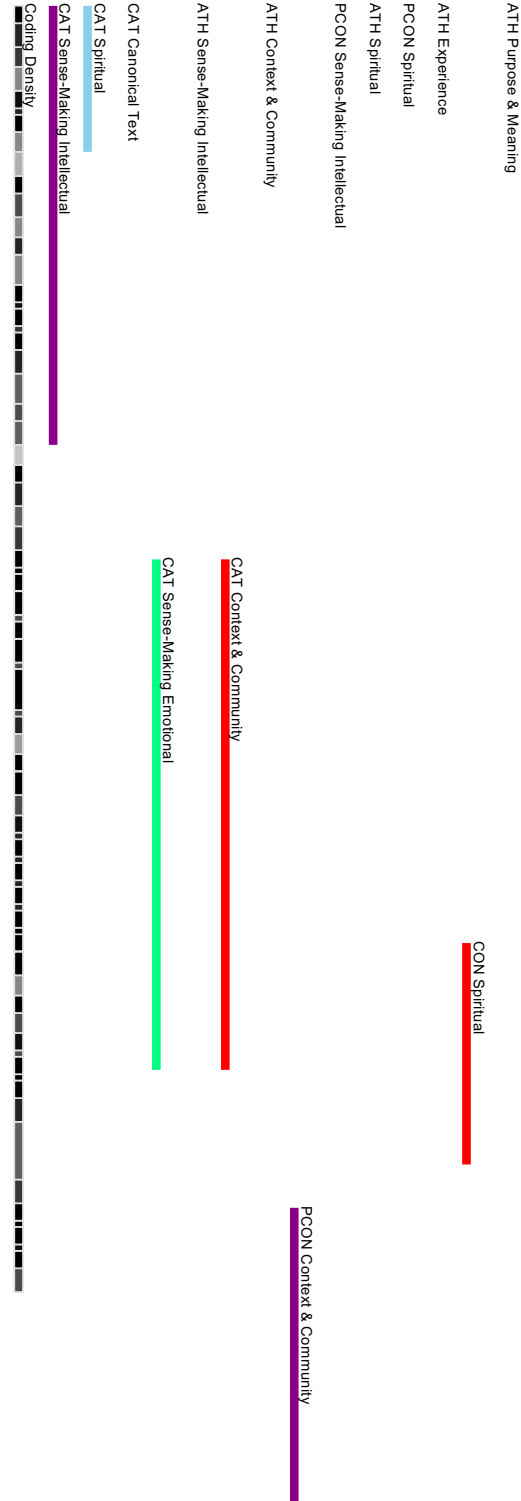
Yes, it was more or less independent between the two of us until the time when we converted, and that in my mind is a really murky timeline. It's not really clear. I think I became intellectually convinced that it was true before I surrendered to it emotionally, spiritually. So the timeline on that isn't necessarily clear in my own mind, when I came to an idea on this, when I came to an idea on that. But, that was all was pretty much internal and independent. Until it reached a tipping point when all of a sudden I guess we said we are Christians now, they're not going to like us anymore.

[34:43 What happened with your group of friends when they found out?]

We lost a lot of friends, honestly. Even then our beliefs were very liberal and in some sense more closely aligned with Atheism than with Christianity on all sorts of issues. But just saying, 'we're going to church this Sunday,' or 'Jesus is God,' a lot of people hated us. I can remember that, just feeling really crappy that friends wouldn't even talk to us anymore because of that.

[that must have been difficult.]

Yes, it was difficult, and I think also though, there's kind of a new conversion joy that helped to get us through it. I had a pretty strong sense of peace about it considering how crappy it was. I mean by that point I was like, 'Okay I'm in this, I looked through this and Christianity is offering the only answers that are even close to coherent.' I felt a lot of peace about that even though at the same time it was really crappy losing a bunch of friends.



[36:09 Intellectually, Christianity was more convincing. Existentially, with how Christianity meets us in our human condition and provides what other worldviews can provides in terms of meaning and purpose, destiny, etc., was that appealing to you, or provide facts that were part of the coherent worldview?]

There are a couple of different components to that. Some were attractive and some were not. Obviously, it was attractive that I was intentionally made by an intelligent agent and that I had a purpose, that life had a purpose and that things weren't completely random. And so all of that was emotionally appealing to me. But, at the same time, belief that I was a sinner, that I needed forgiveness and needed to repent was a really tough idea for me to work through. I felt like I had spent so much of my life over the past couple of years hearing incessantly that 'Everything is okay, do what you want, this is okay, that's okay.' So to have all of a sudden both an internal and external source, because my own conscience was starting to change, and then also reading through the Bible, having internal and external confirmation that that wasn't the case was really jarring for me. It wasn't necessarily attractive either even with the offer of forgiveness attached to it. It was hard to see myself in that light. I had a lot of pride and didn't want to see myself in that light. I didn't want to think I had done things wrong and I didn't want to think that I had sinned and needed forgiveness. So, that was really a tough adaptation for me.

[38:33. Did that resistance hold you back?]

Yes, that was a huge part of what held me back for sure.

[How did you finally come to that place of being able to lay down your pride and surrender?]

That's a good question. It's also really cloudy in my mind in terms of when that actually happened. I feel like I might have been going to church for months before that happened. I don't know at what point I really felt comfortable with that idea and I must have been really slowly accepting little pieces, 'ok, I did this wrong. Ok, I did this wrong.' It wasn't at once that my whole worldview changed with regard to sin and repentance. That wasn't the case for me. It was a much slower, gradual process for me.

[39:35 You had positioned yourself, going to church, willing to put yourself in a situation where in some ways you were affirming the truth of Christianity by going through some motions.]

I think at that point I believed it. If you want to speak more spiritually, I was saved at that point, but it was a slow work, heart and mind, to actually change my worldview.

[40:29 You mentioned that you responded to a religious/mystical experience. Did you have a particular experience that occurred over and above your intellectual seeking?]

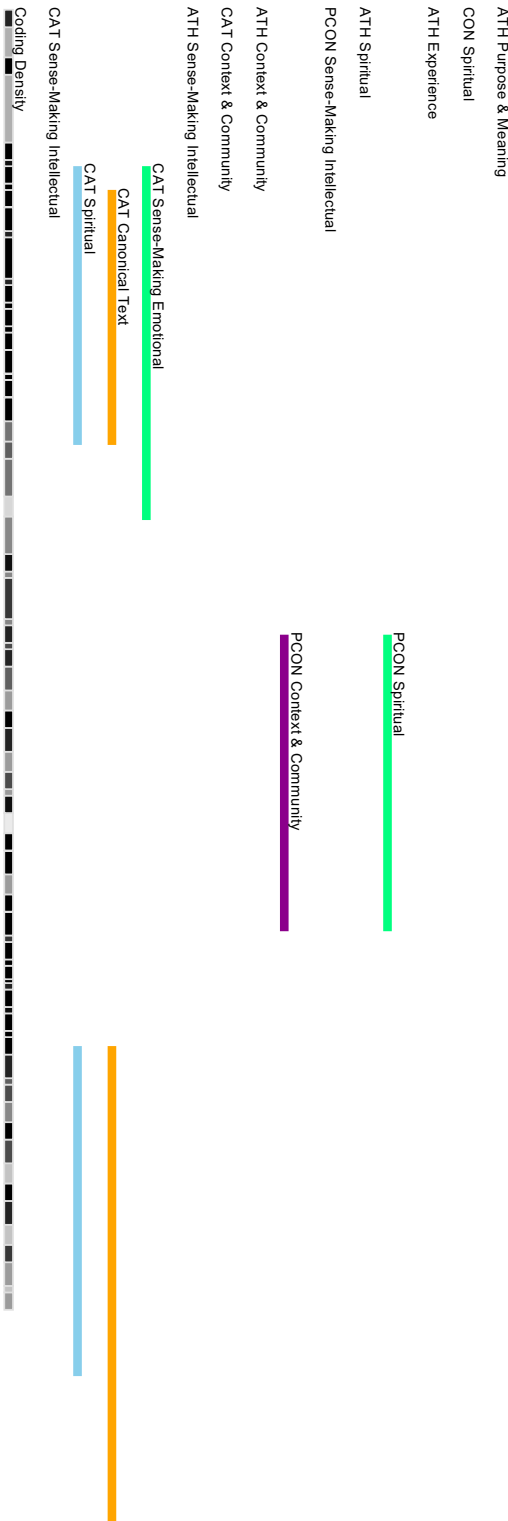
I guess it was, it wasn't like a vision or anything like that but I was really feeling so strongly drawn to the character of Jesus and that was, it hard to explain they discord in my mind but I was thinking that Christianity is probably true being strongly, supernaturally, powerfully attracted to the person of Jesus but somehow still hating Christianity. I know it doesn't make a lot of sense to say these things in concert but that is the discord that was going on in my mind and heart there. And the spiritual experience is when I would read or think anything about Jesus. And I just remember reading the Bible and literally shaking when I read the gospels because I just could not that there is a person like this, that this person was God, And that this person cared for me.

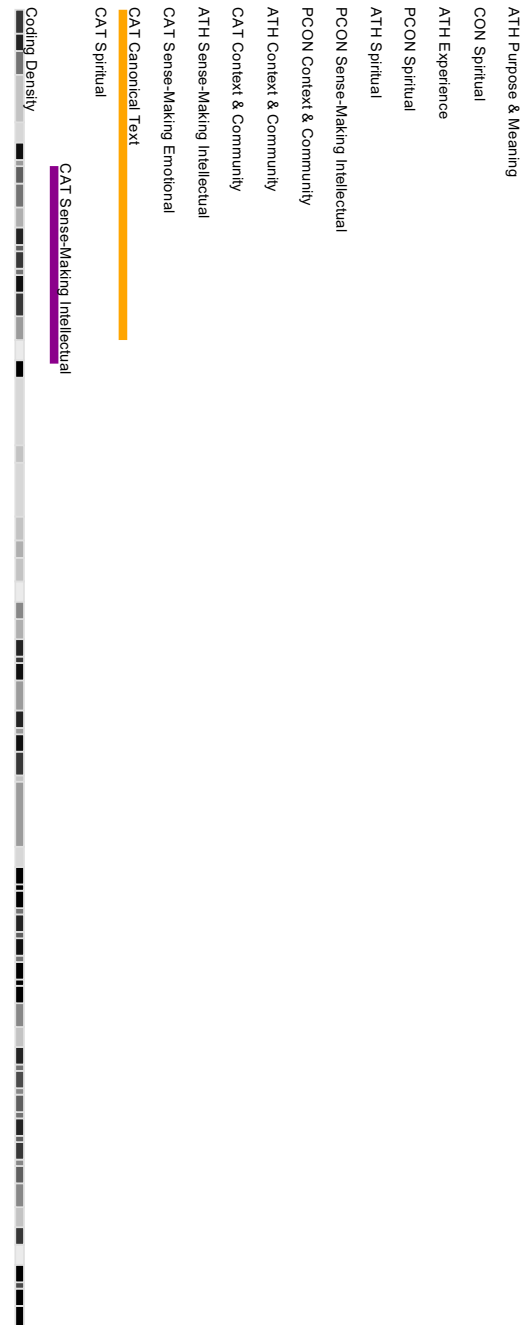
Even though I wasn't necessarily willing to jump in full boar at that point, that was like a draw on my heart that I felt needed an answer.

[42:07 When you were reading the Bible, you were open to the person of Jesus. Were you reading the Bible also with a sceptical or critical eye?]

Apart from Jesus and the Gospels, I had a critical eye towards everything else. And it was pretty easy for me to almost dismiss the old testament out of hand. I didn't know how to necessarily reconcile that. I thought there was a dis

connect between what I am reading in the Torah and





what I am reading in Jesus. Maybe to some extent I felt there was even a disconnect in reading the epistles because I wasn't having that same kind of emotional draw. The emotional draw that I was having was very much towards the person of Jesus and the epistles at that point didn't even make any sense to me. The Old Testament seemed to be outdated and barbaric. So, it was a tough place, making sense of all of those things.

[43:25 So it was a process overtime, like you say, even looking at the Bible in a way that cohered with the person of Christ and the grander narrative?] [You've obviously grown a great deal in your knowledge and your understanding in your faith. How did that happen?]

[44:17] Partially, I'm inquisitive by nature. Also, I really felt I needed to have good answers. So, again, it was internal and external forces that made me want to read up a lot about these things. So I started reading more books about church history, philosophy, different apologetic arguments just for my own satisfaction; and, also, so I could hold my own in debates with people who were really violently against me.

[You are an intelligent and educated Christian. Do you have opportunity to engage with Atheists or people from your former life?]

Yes on occasion. Those conversations are still really difficult to have and I would say that I'm not the best at having them. They're rare and I let them come at the other person's request. So, I'm not necessarily super proactive in shaking out those conversations with people, probably not as proactive as I should be. I guess that's because I still feel an apprehension from my past about being too pushy or whatever. But, I have some interactions with that and feel that I can relate to people who are in the same position that I have been in. I might be in a position to better understand what their problems are.

46:06. [What would you recommend to Christians regarding engagement with Atheists?]

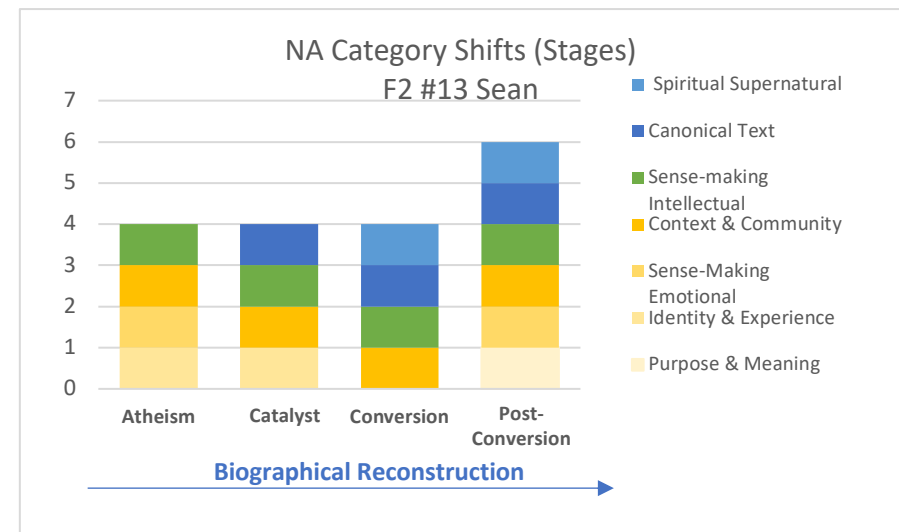
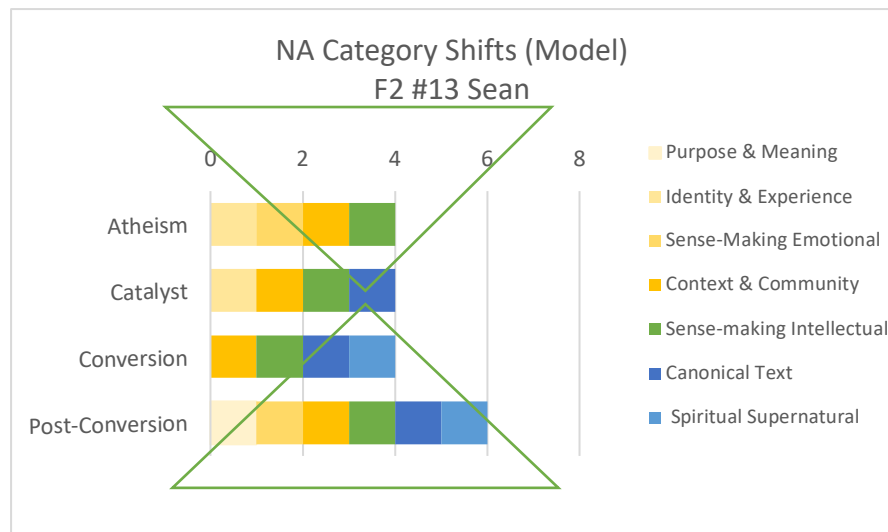
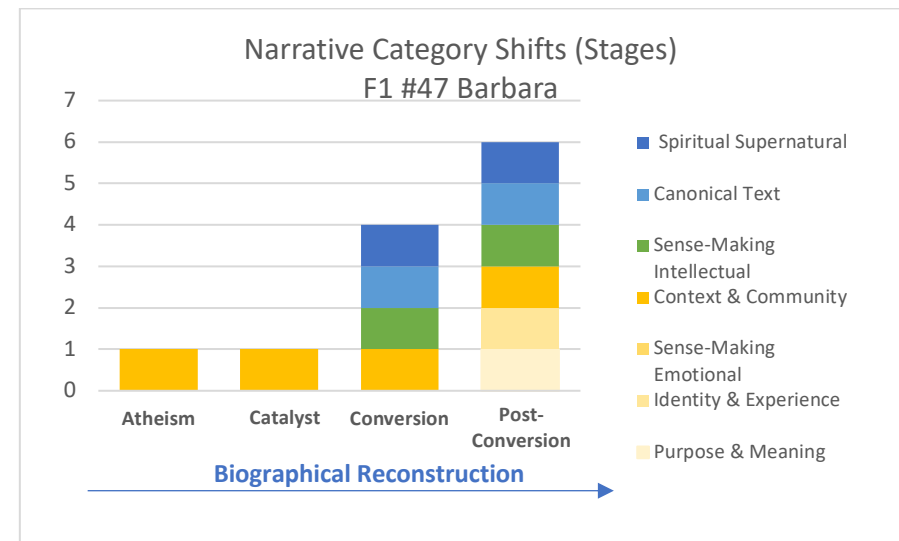
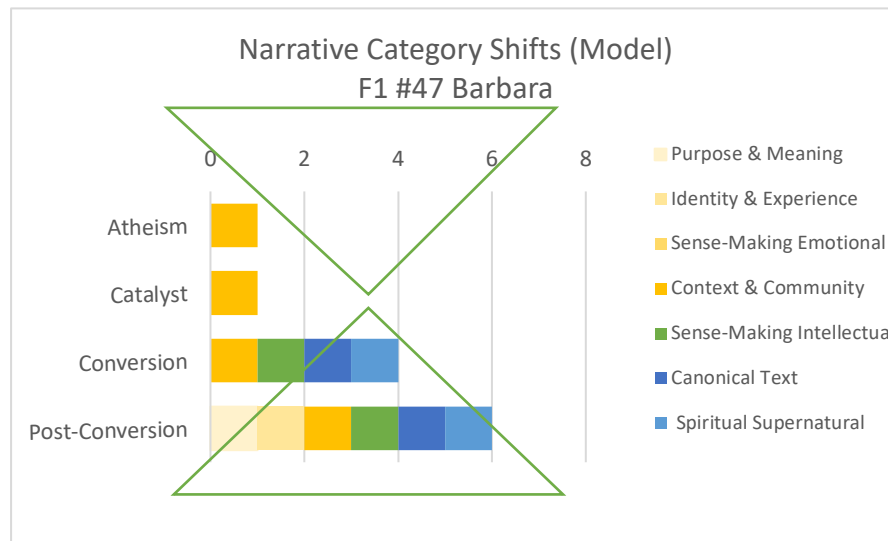
Most of the things I would recommend aren't necessarily rooted in knowledge. What I would really recommend is to be a good listener, to take the persons positions and arguments seriously and to not necessarily presume to have all of the answers because often we don't have answers that should be totally satisfying to ourselves. And I feel like sometimes we have pressure to pass off our answers as if they are really good and fully fleshed out and they are the end all and be all – especially if we want to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over another worldview. We just say, 'here's the answer.' But, often times I think that that is not necessarily the case and that we don't have the answer totally figured out either, and that's ok to say that. It's ok to give a partial answer that's really compelling.

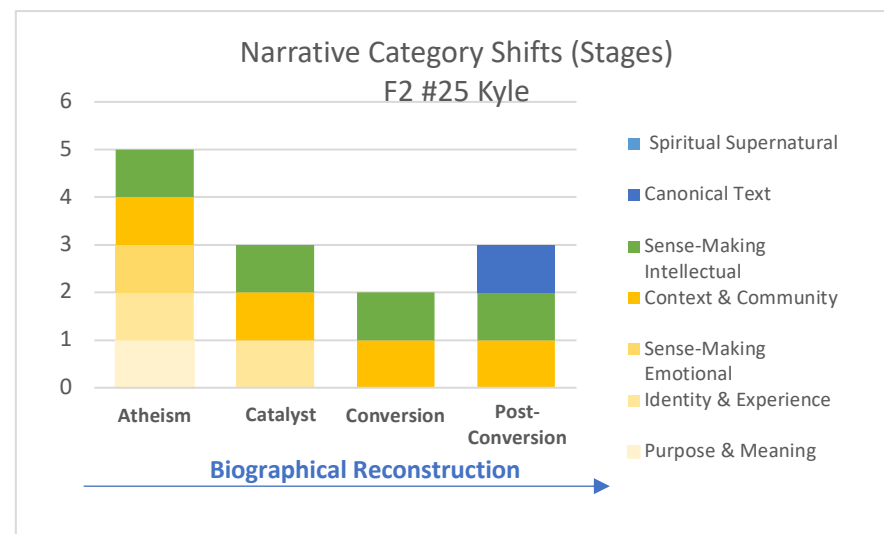
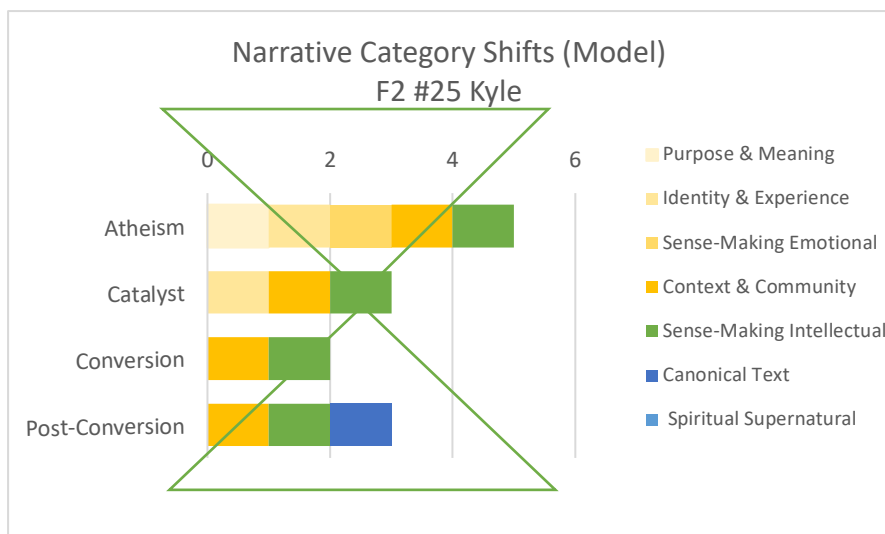
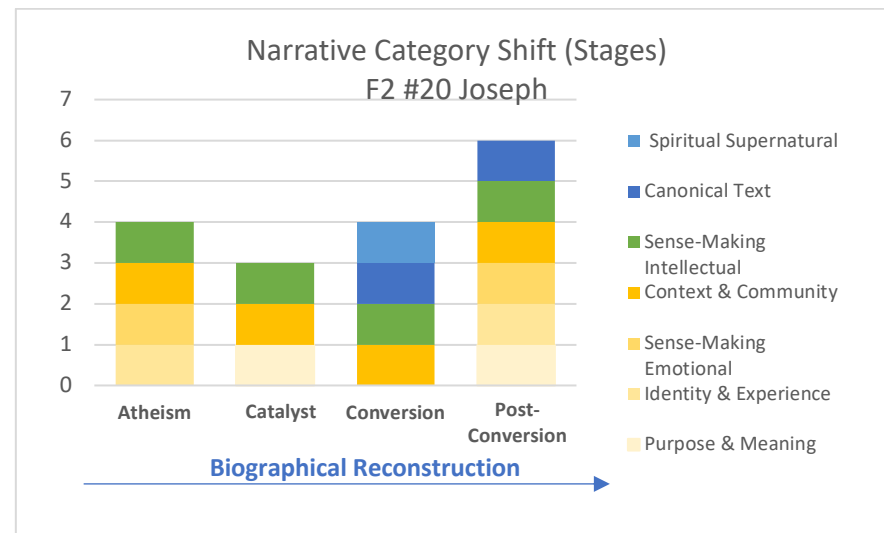
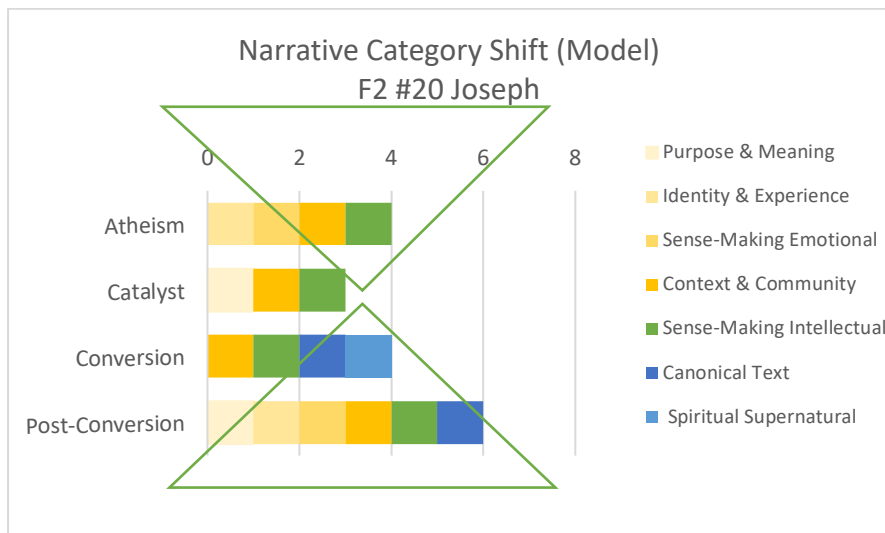
To go back to the moral argument, which is something that stands out, I don't think Christianity has a really great emotionally and intellectually satisfying answer for the problem of evil. I think Alvin Plantinga has pretty much killed the logical problem of evil, but the evidential or probabilistic problem of evil is still a really good argument against Christianity and it is emotionally compelling. Speaking about it in just dry philosophical terms isn't going to help. It's not going to change anyone's mind. It's not going to make a non-Christian feel heard either. It makes them feel as if their question isn't even being understood or cared about.

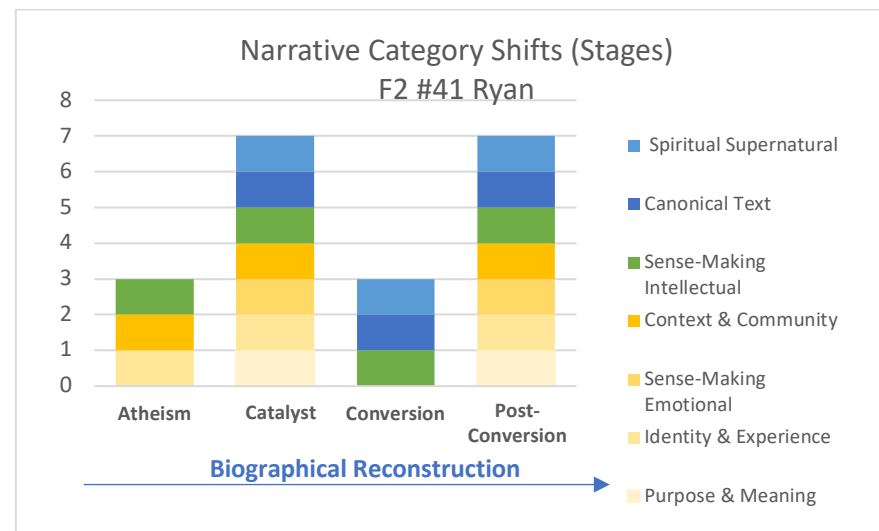
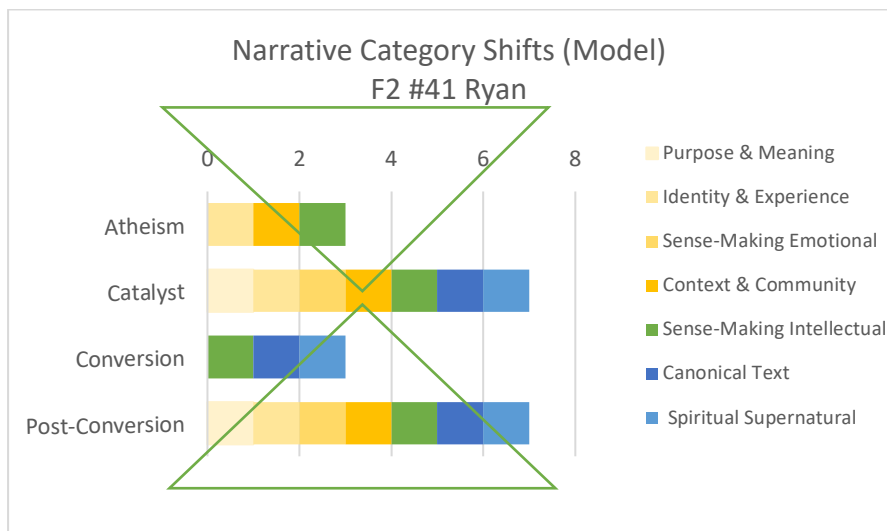
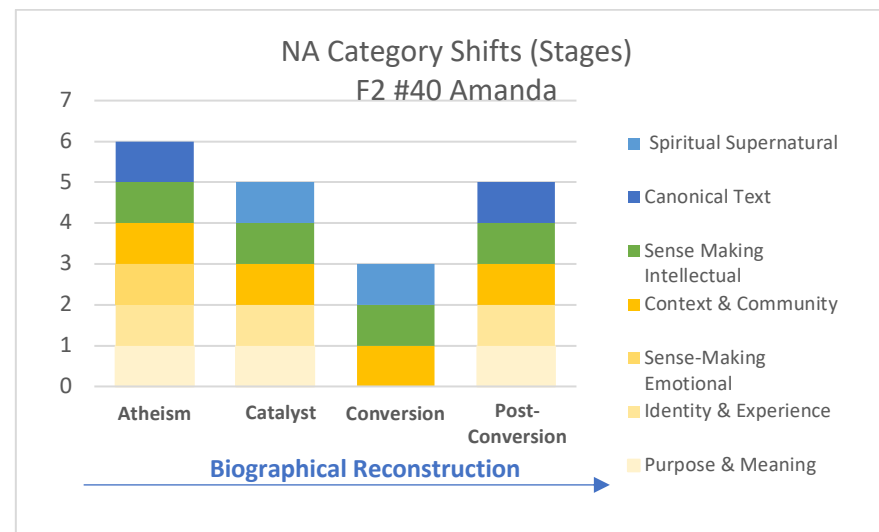
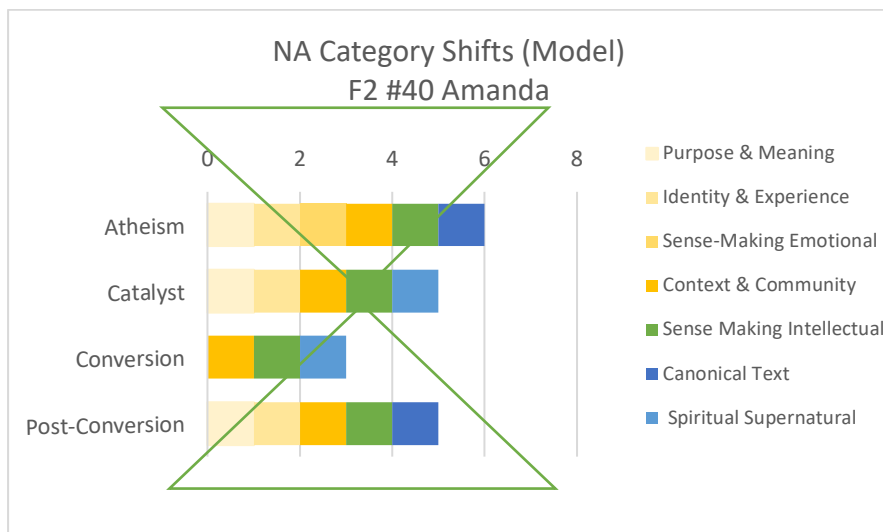
So, in those kind of questions, it would be advisable to give whatever answer we have. It's enough to just say that Christianity makes sense of moral values and duties and you can come along side the person and say that the problem of evil is really tough. Here are some thoughts but its not a complete answer. To me, personally, if someone tried to give a complete answer I would find it off-putting because I would feel like it doesn't take seriously the problem of pain and sorrow and grief in our world. But, as an Atheist, a thousand times more I would think it's just not compelling when someone presents something as a final answer.

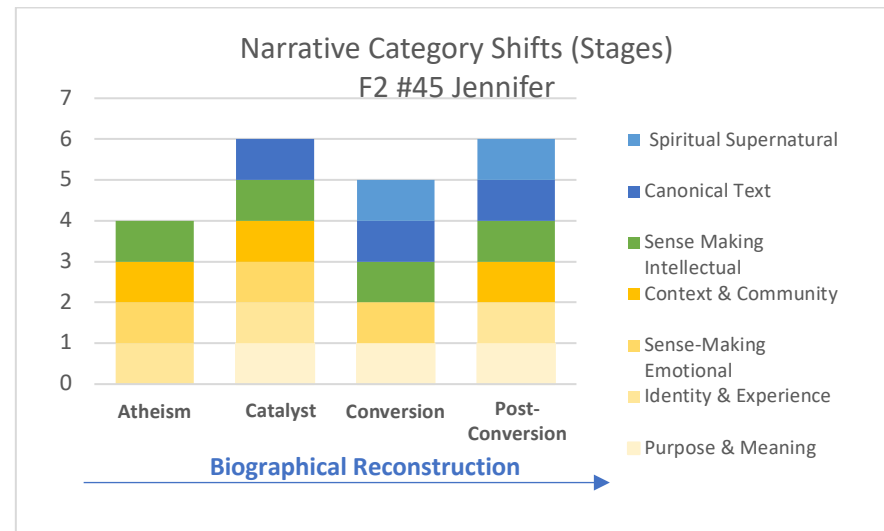
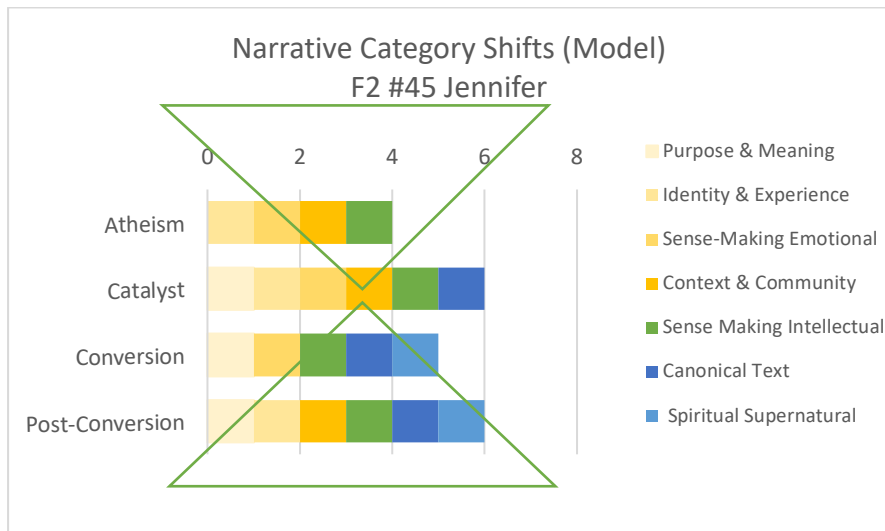
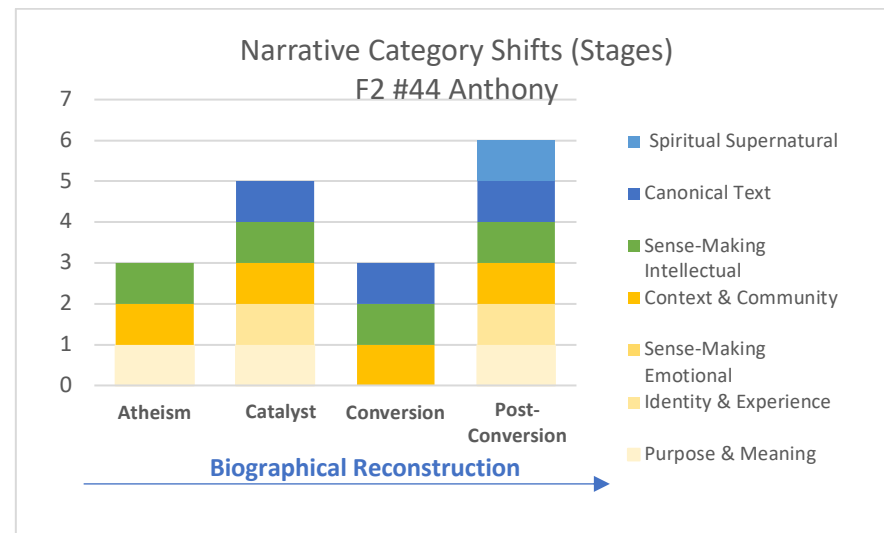
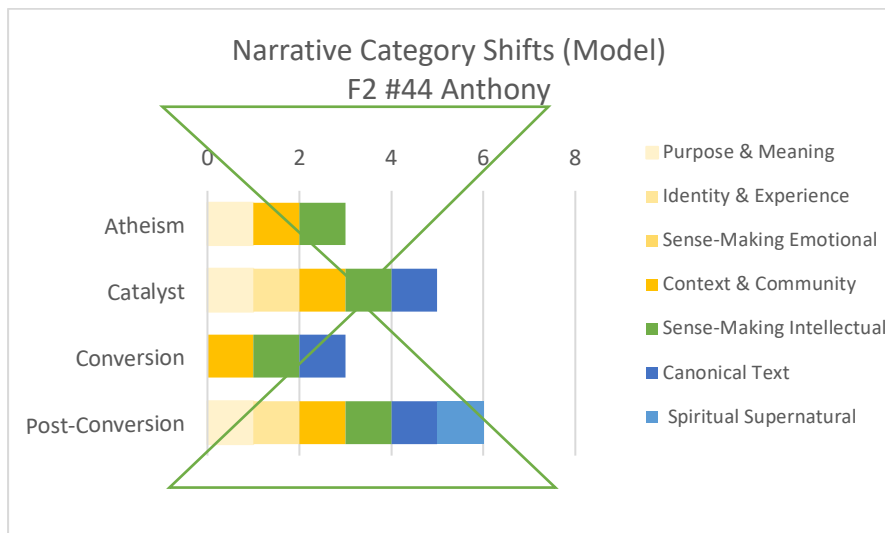
So, being content with partial answers would be part of what I would suggest

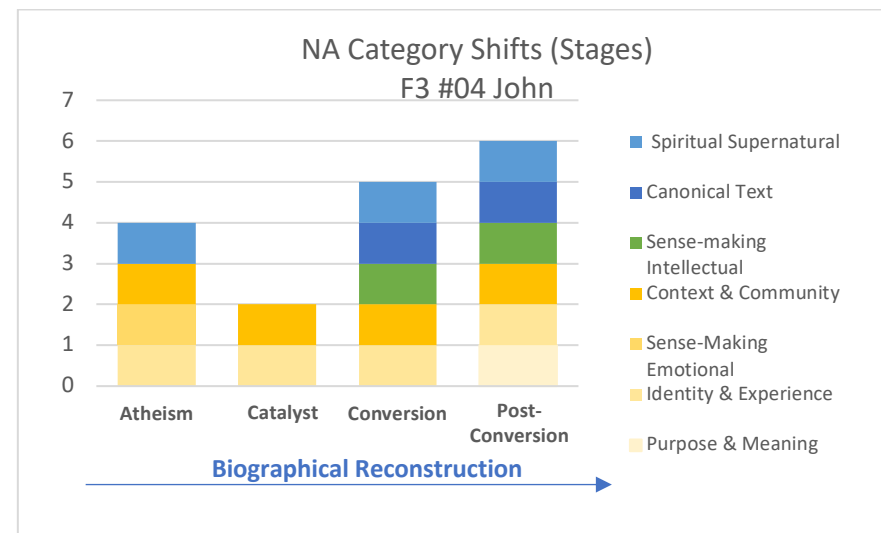
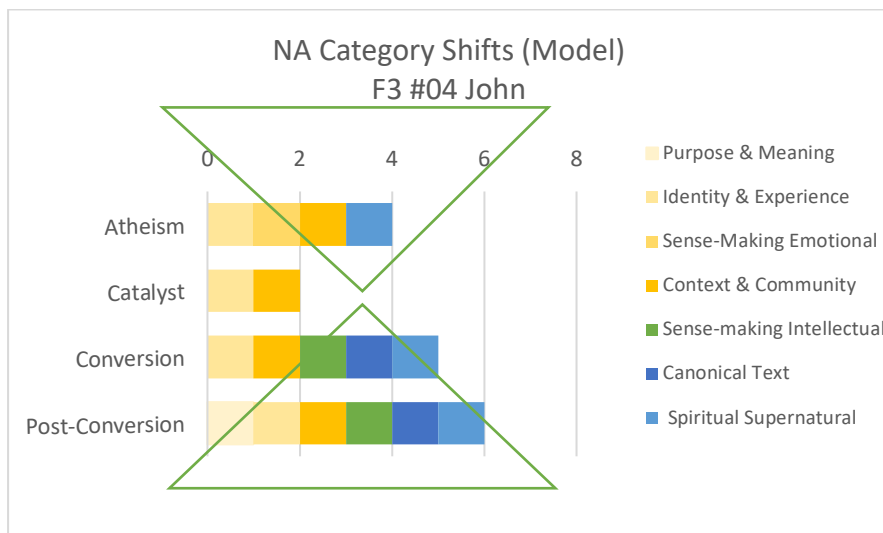
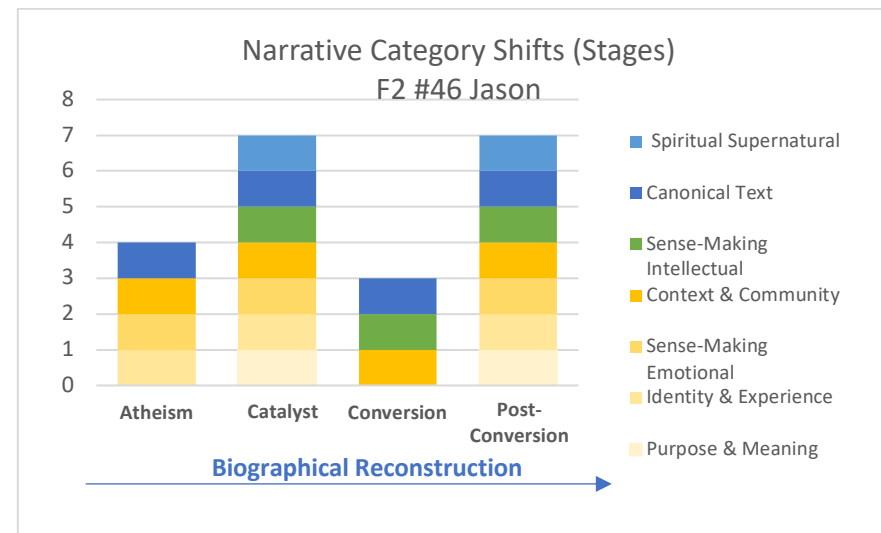
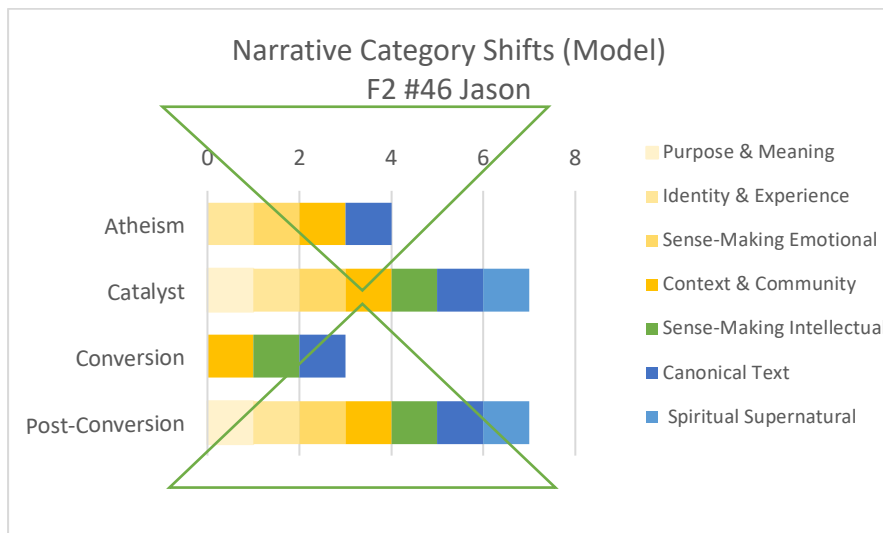
Figure 45. Narrative Category Shift Charts, Sample Group (23)

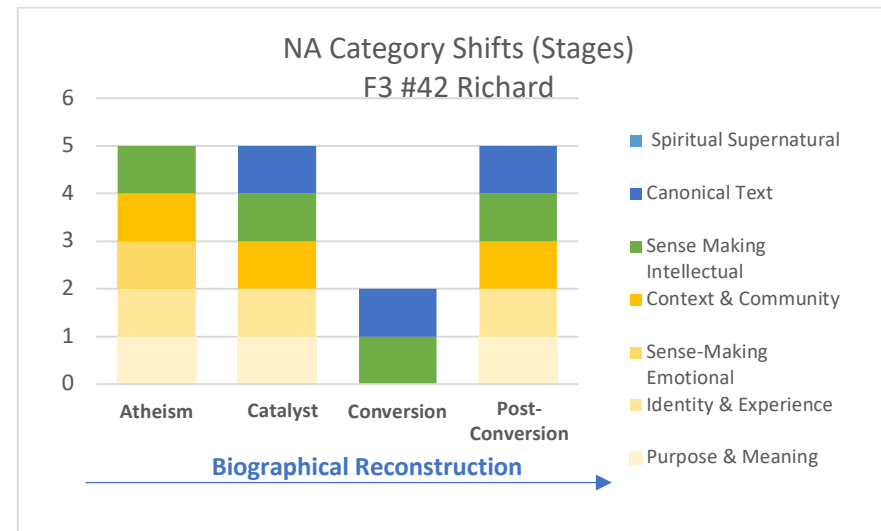
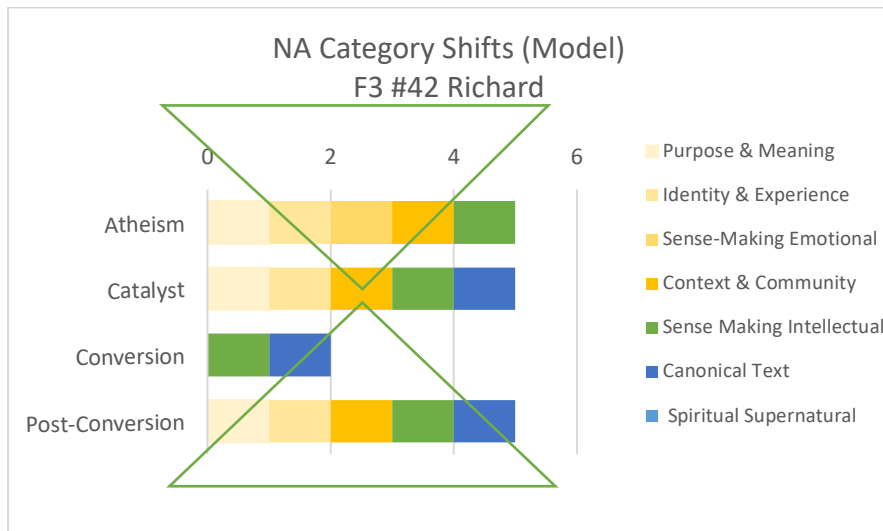
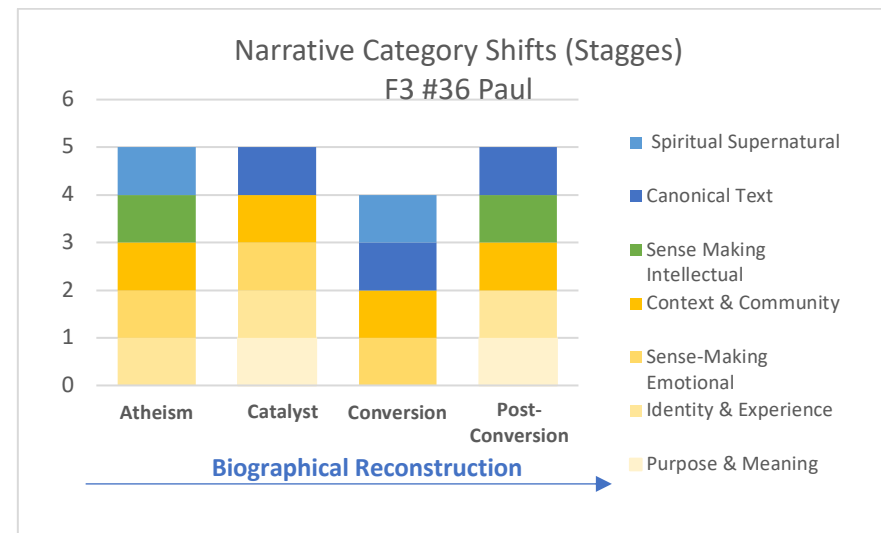
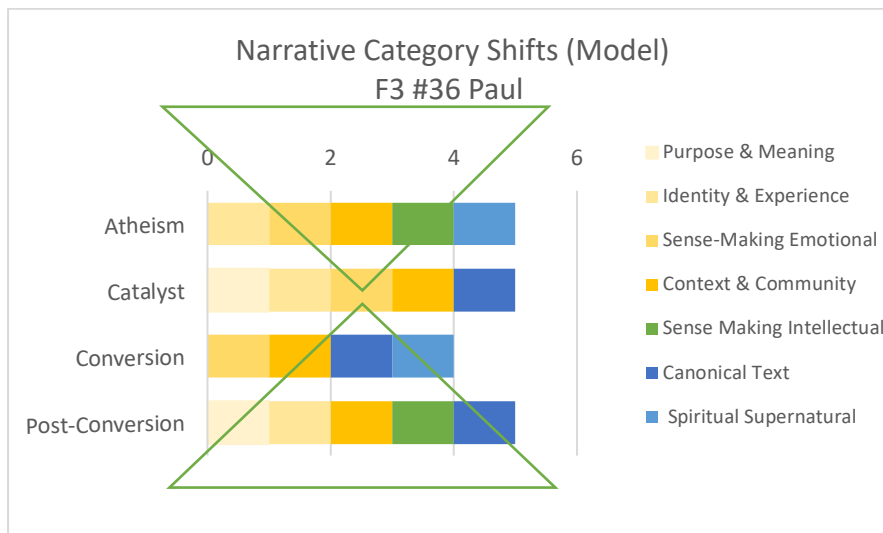


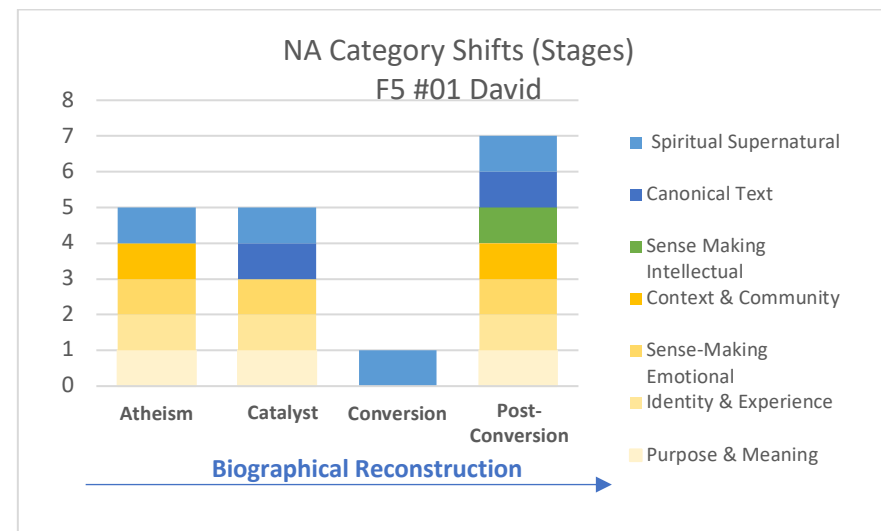
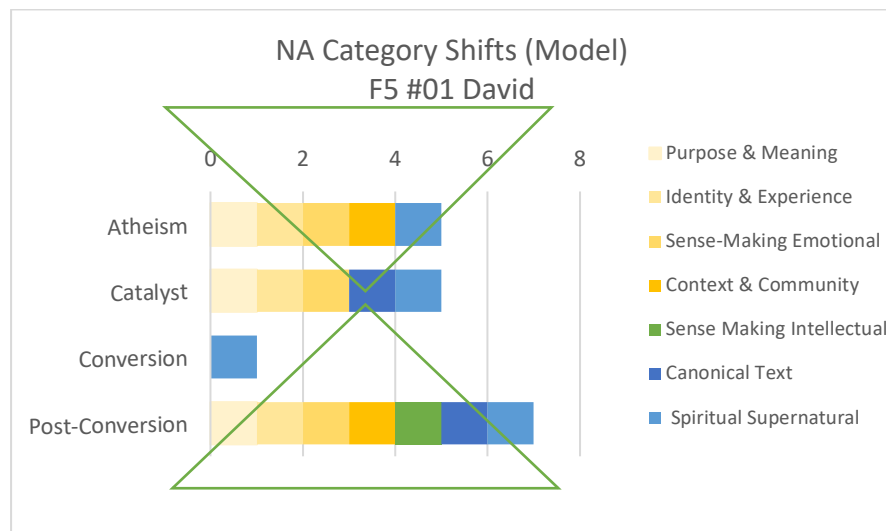
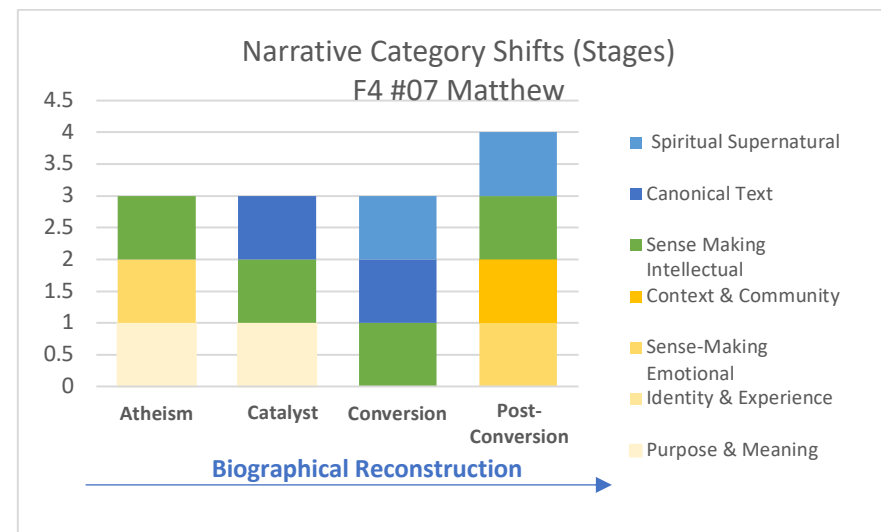
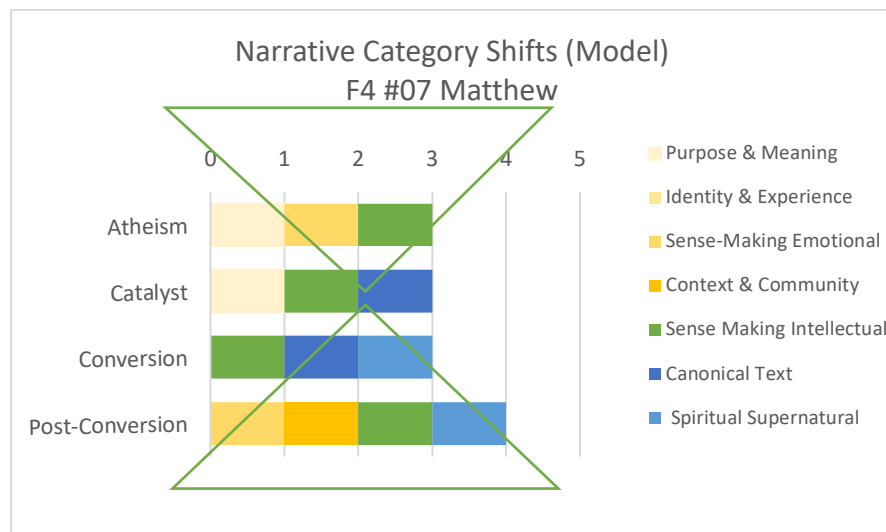


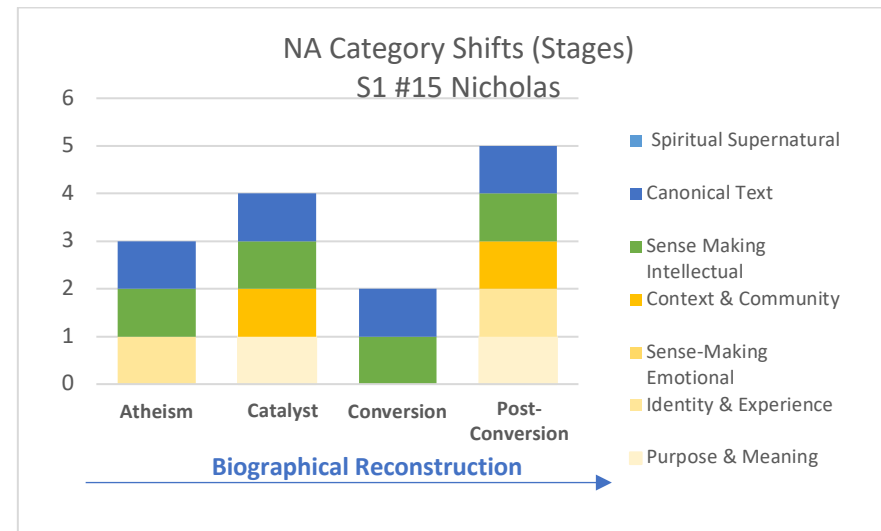
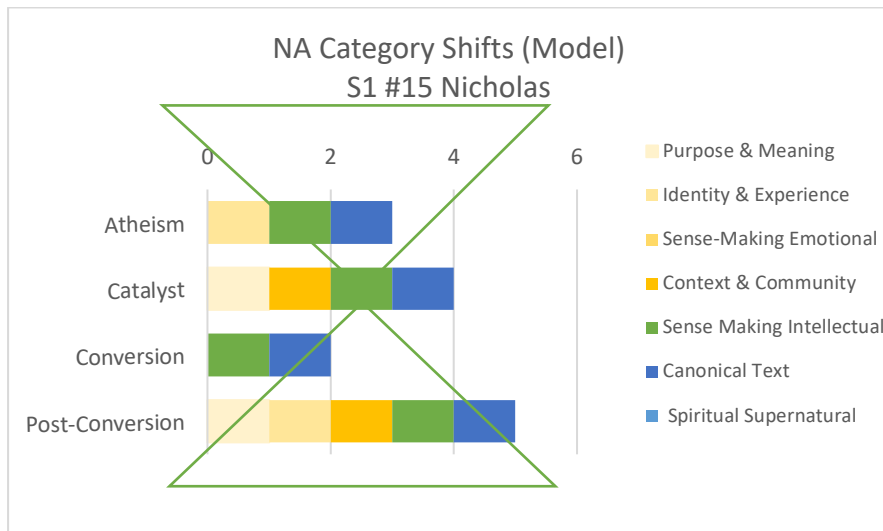
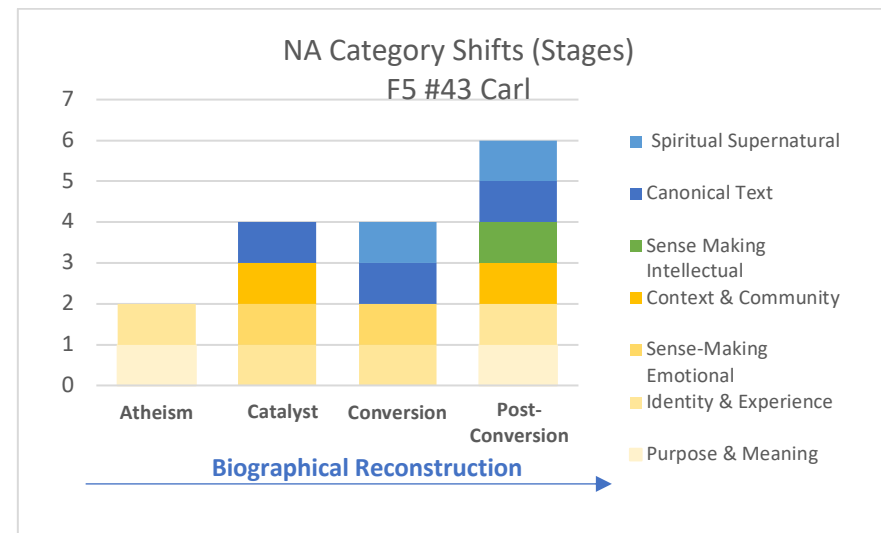
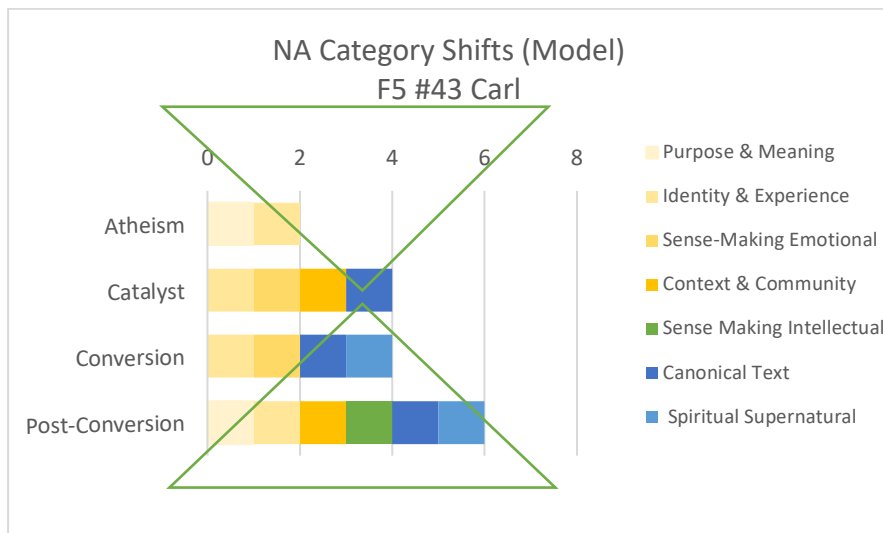


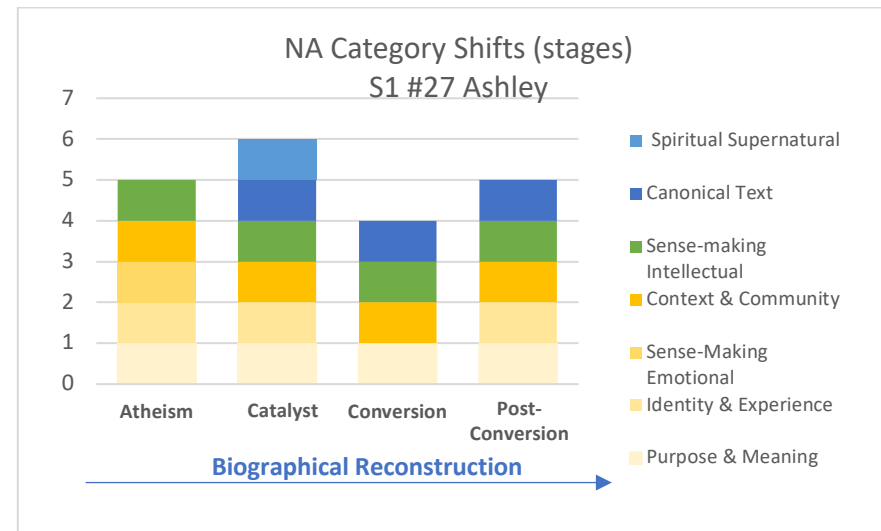
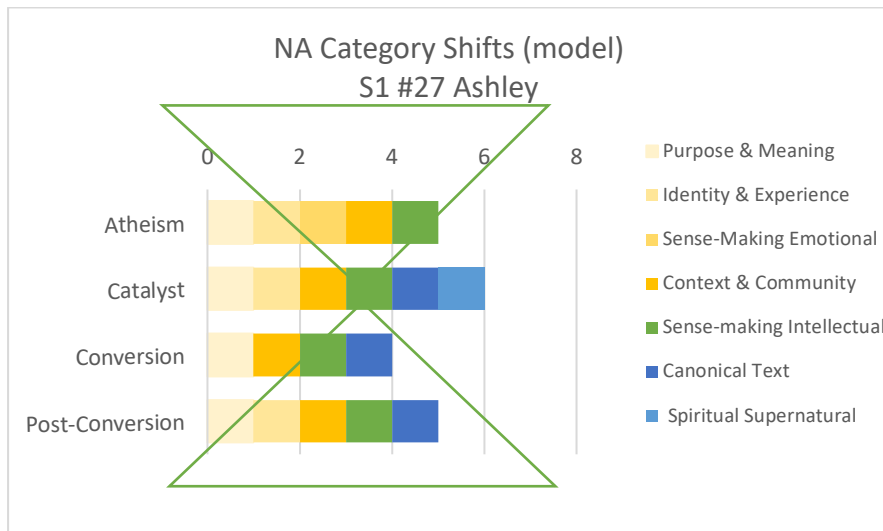
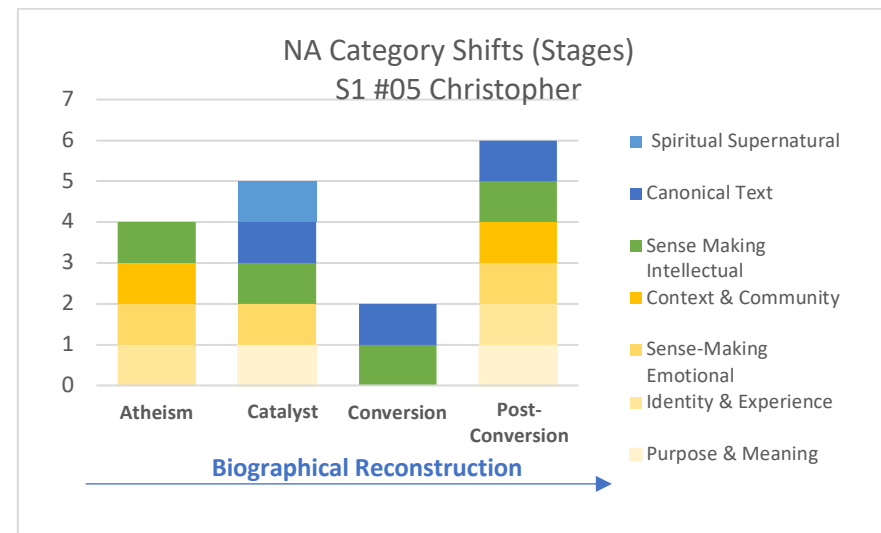
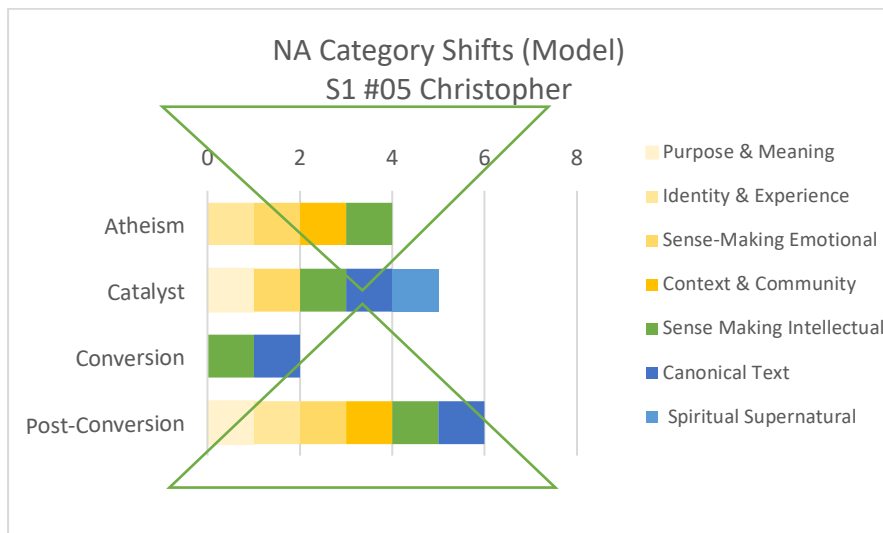


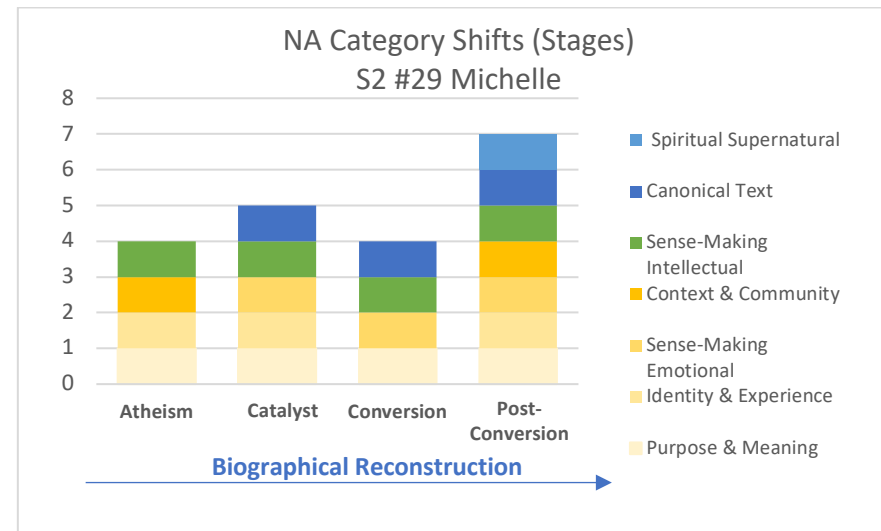
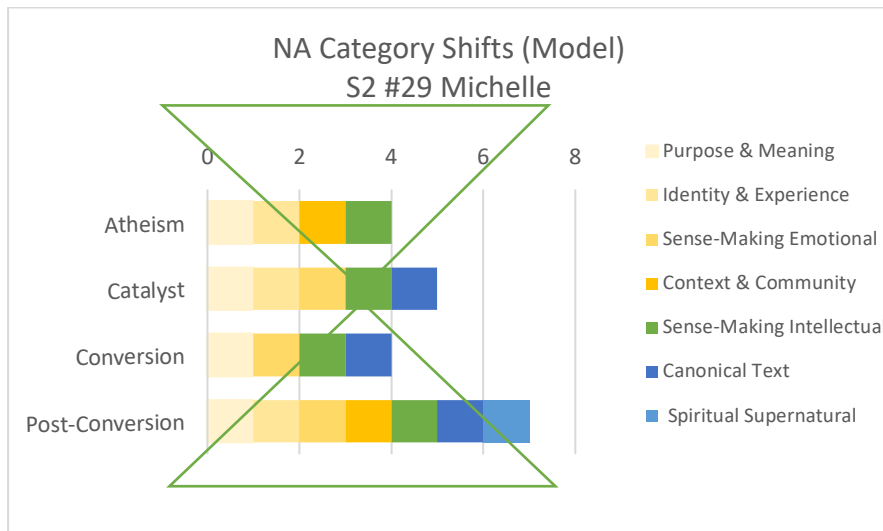
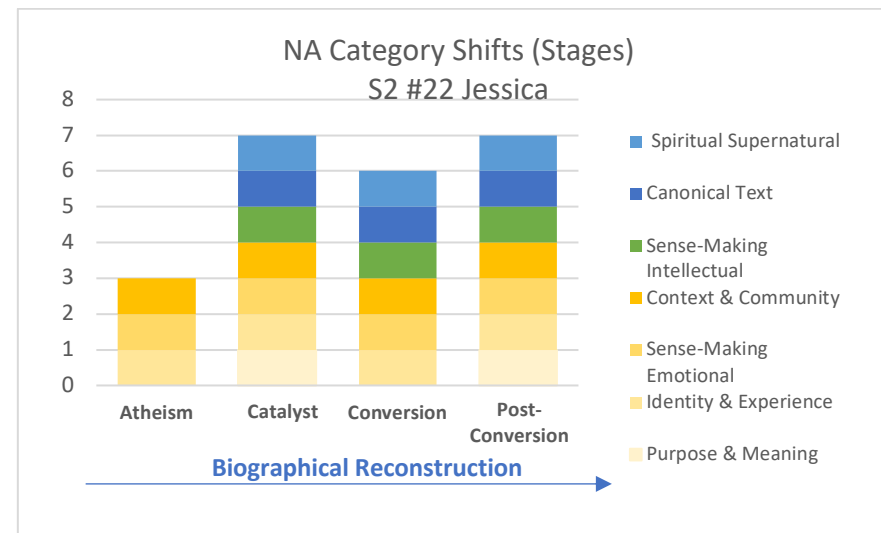
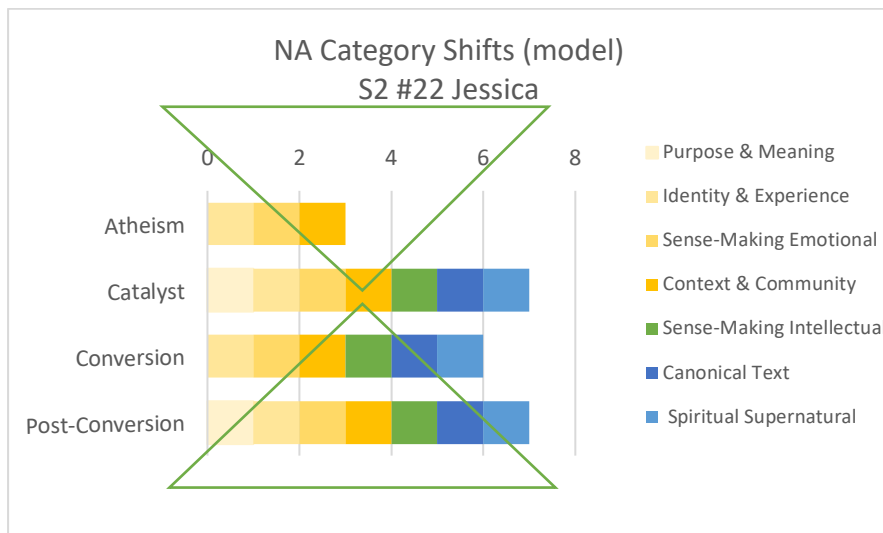


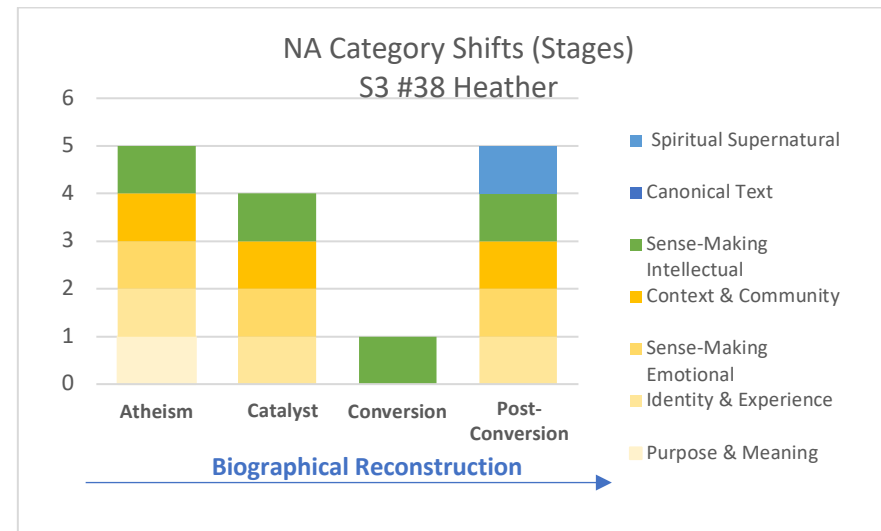
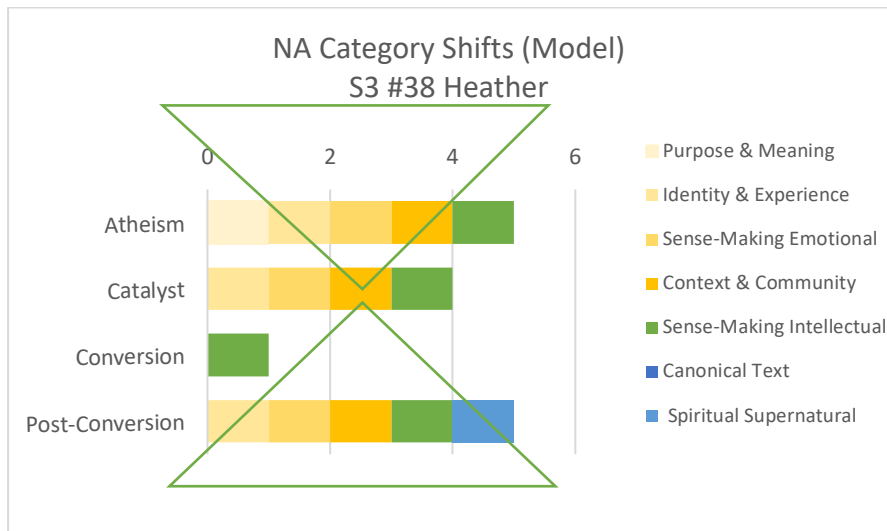
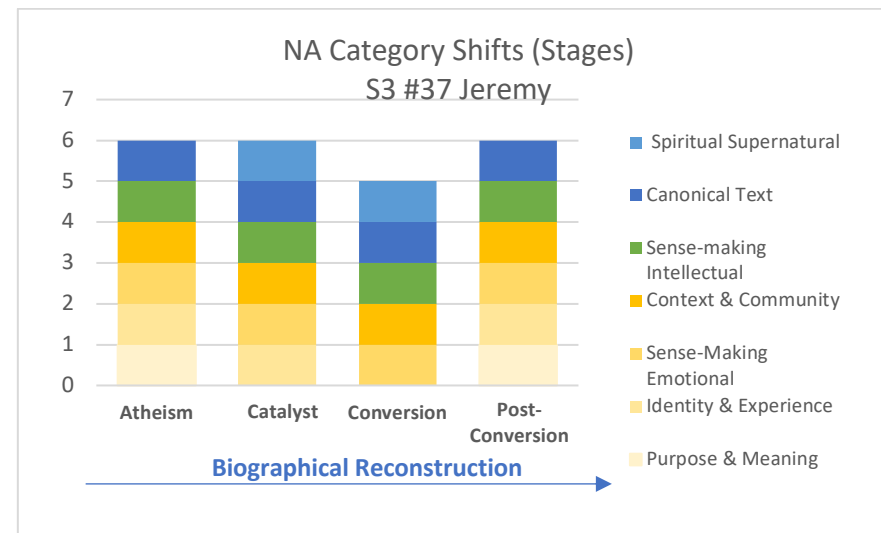
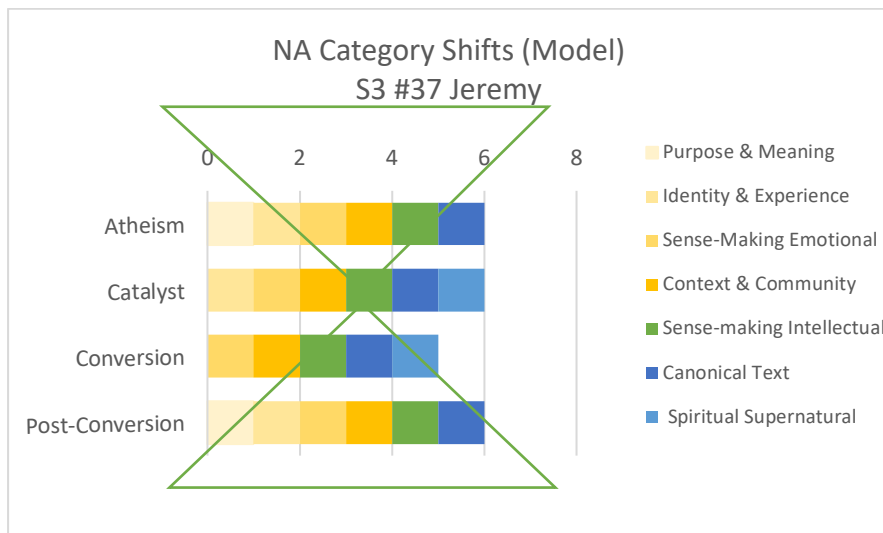


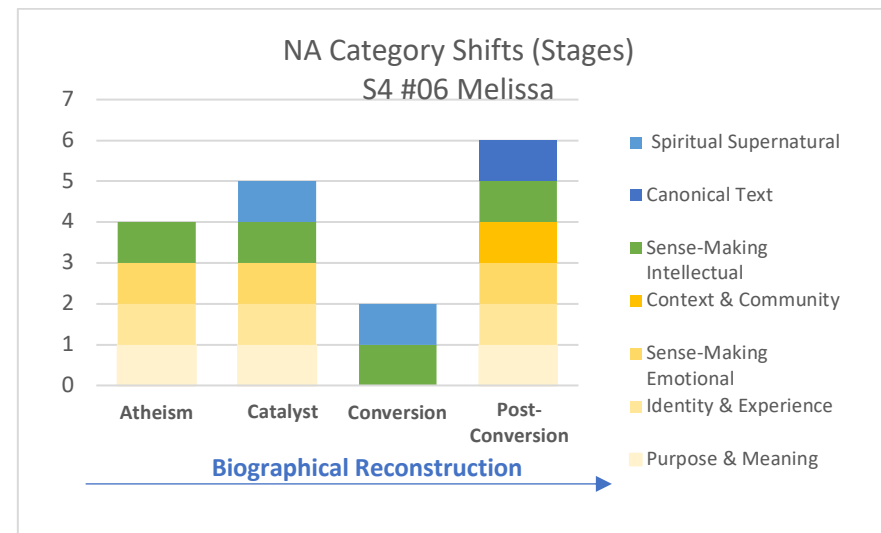
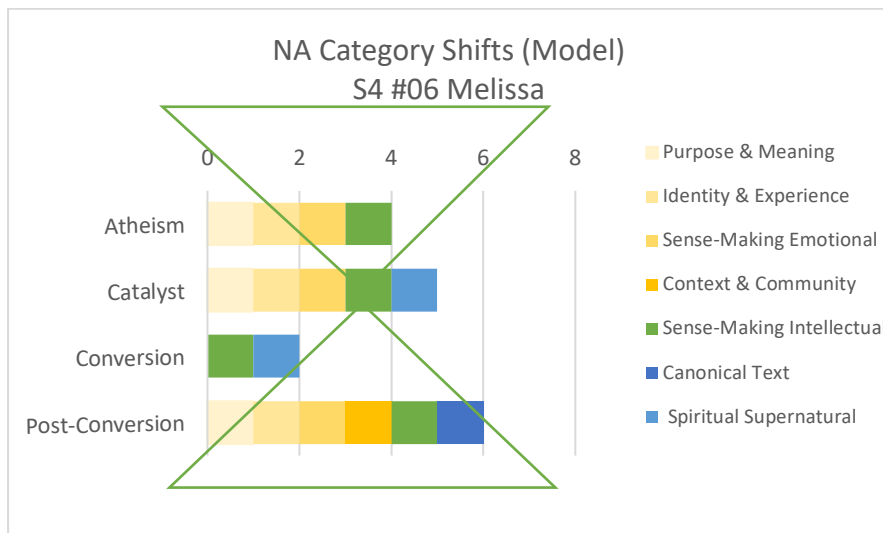












12.13. Introspective Reflexive Writing (as different from observational reflexive writing)

Freewriting November 4, 2014.

13 Interviews to date.

The point of no return.

There are so many things going through my head regarding all of the people I've met through these interviews. What strikes me most is total life transformation and devotion to Jesus Christ. Most of them are fully engaged in some sort of ministry, because if Jesus is who He says he is, been this has profound implications, Not only for themselves, but for the world. They had considered conversion seriously because it entails a fully orbbed paradigm shift, changing every part of their life, every perspective, social relationships, purpose for living. They find themselves in a precarious situation because for most, the thought of becoming a Christian was something completely foreign to their way of thinking and living.

Their world and their worldview were turned upside down. Their pre-conversion understanding of God, of faith, of Jesus, Of Christianity, Christians was totally transformed. Conversion takes its full form, converting every aspect of their reality, of the way that they see life, the way that they live life. No stone is left unturned. It is a radical reorientation which affects every thought, every emotion, every relationship. Darkness moving into light. Veiled faces unveiled. Blinded eyes unblinded. There is no going back. Once you have been given eyes to see and ears to hear, once you have tasted of the living light and love of Christ, there is no return. Once great mercy, love and grace has been tasted, the mere idea of return is unfathomable.

But, movement from dark to light comes in different forms, in different ways. God's ways are mysterious although intimately personal in His drawing us to Himself. Unusual circumstances, people, places, and events enter into our lives, awakening our souls and spirits to His reality. Sometimes in a dramatic experience. Sometimes in a loving, caring face. Sometimes in the recognition of undeniable, rational, true truth. Once tasting of the eternal glory and reality of a forgiving, infinitely loving and rational Savior, there is no going back.

I imagine it is like those who have had near death experiences, who have been momentarily immersed in the reality of another world, a world that piques every sense in the realm of love, goodness, truth and beauty. A world so otherworldly that the thought of return seems incredibly reductionistic and disappointing. Once the truth of Christ is not only seen but known and experienced, the thought of going back becomes unfathomable. Life in the light of Christ becomes the only option. For, if He is the way, the truth, and the life, then considering anything or anyone else becomes nonsense, a virtual nonissue.

Profound life change. Dramatic. Unfettered. Undeniable. Real. True. Life that is truly life. Abundant, life-giving. Death to life. Going back is not even a possibility. More than that, telling the world about Jesus becomes primary in purpose, in life, in living. Compelled. Here they stand and humbly acknowledge the gracious act of God in their lives. They can do none other.

Freewriting, November 6, 2014
Unexpected Places.

When you say yes to God, you find yourself in unexpected places. I know I am in an unexpected place here interviewing converted Atheists, in a PhD program thinking and writing about big issues. I would've never in a million years seen myself doing what I am doing. It came as an unexpected surprise, good and challenging, but a surprise nonetheless.

An unexpected place is an understatement as a description of the converted Atheist. So alien in thinking, in conception is the mere thought of finding oneself in the group of people you once considered weird, uneducated, irrational, and superstitious. How does that happen? How does someone so resistant even to the idea of religion find themselves steeped in faith, so much so that they not only find themselves compelled to believe it is true and real, but many have devoted their life purposes towards convincing others of its truth.

How does that happen? It is a dramatic paradigm shift, not only turning their worldview upside down but their world as well. It is not taking one piece of their reality and tweaking a bit. No, it is taking the whole thing, lock, stock and barrel, and turning it upside down. It is no slight alteration. It is a complete deconstruction and reconstruction of the design, of the way of looking at life, of the way of living life. It is a completely new reality. Blind are given sight. Faces are unveiled. Light pierces the darkness and there is no going back. The experience is too profound. The understanding is too illuminating.

To return would be to deny everything that had been shown to be that which is truly good, truly beautiful, truly true. How can you deny what has become so undeniably real? It is not even conceivable once you find yourself on the other side of the barrier. On the other side of the world spiritual reality has come alive. Desires and longings are met in the face of Jesus. Life that is truly life, abundant and satisfying is found. A hidden treasure discovered and embraced, worth everything. Worth it all.

All of the pieces that were disjointed and scattered on the table without a place to fit now find a coherent home where suddenly they join, perfectly matching the soft contours and hard corners to form a beautiful whole. What was once meaningless becomes meaningful. What was once purposeless becomes infused with purpose. What was once irrational becomes both the grounding and logic of all knowledge. What was once considered foolishness becomes transformed into the wisdom of God. How was it missed for so long? How can we stray from and deny the very reality which informs and sustains all of reality, life, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, human desires and affections? How were we so blinded for so long? Praise be to God who abounds in love and desires that we see Him, see reality for what it is, who leads us into unexpected places, who turns our world upside down.

November 7, 2014
The Guilt Card. [James/Ashley]

There is something inside of us that we seem to know, that is undeniable, and more than that, unavoidable. There is that something that reminds us that some of our thoughts and actions are not good. Without God, we seem to get a get out of jail free card with no moral culpability. In fact, according to naturalistic materialism, we can't even control our thoughts or actions. They are determined for us, so there is no moral responsibility. We are just thinking and doing what our genetics and environment and experience prompt us to do.

Why, then, does our conscious tell us that what we are thinking and doing is wrong? Oh, that's right, we have no real conscious state because we are merely material beings. And, further, we actually have no self. That, too, is an illusion. There is no good or bad, right or wrong. Moral choice is an oxymoron. There is no choice. There is no chooser. We are just DNA and we dance to its music according to Richard Dawkins. We do not choose. We are not culpable. In fact, nothing is bad, so there is no culpability. It is all a nonissue. We are nonissues. Even this conversation is meaningless. Not only is God dead, but everything is dead.

That is an enormous, unfathomable cost to rid ourselves of guilt. For, in the end, we rid ourselves of our very selves. We deny the reality of sin. But, in doing so, we deny the reality of our dignity, our free choices, the things that make us human. We have to deny all that informs who we are and how we live, our normal paradigms and expressions of being. That is long way to go. Running as far as we can from God in order to avoid and escape His holiness, His ultimate transcendent standard of goodness that shines a light into the dark recesses of our soul. How far will we go to deny the obvious?

Many Atheists admit to the objective reality of good and bad, right and wrong. They know that moral relativism holds no weight, that you cannot sustain that line of reasoning without at the same time undermining it. There is no escape except for venturing onto the path of irrationality. Embracing a worldview, giving reason for it, reveling in moral autonomy only to be enslaved by its destructive, inescapable web. The web of belief that is meant to provide flexibility and autonomy without accountability flies away with the slightest wind. For, we cannot escape our own conscience. It convicts us. It reminds us that there is no one who is good except for God alone. Our haunting conscience serves only to point to the Author of good whether we like it or not.

The relief of guilt, of burden, of the weight of reality bearing down is not found in denial of sin or even the eradication of self. It is found only in forgiveness from the One who sees, the One who knows us more intimately than we know ourselves. It comes from the One who, while we were yet sinners, died for us, who became sin so that we might know the righteousness of God. It comes through forgiveness, releasing chains and imprisonment of guilt, only to find life that is truly life in Christ.

November 10, 2014

Going Against the Grain. The In Crowd. [Tom/Charles/Christopher]

It is thought that religion is a social construction, motivated by social beings drawn towards others through their desire for belonging. Indeed, acceptance by others is a strong motivator, one that is felt keenly throughout life. In our humanity, we crave relationships; and, within those relationships finding acceptance and belonging. It is a basic human need. We acutely desire the association with social circles, those which we approach to find our identity, acceptance, belonging and care; however, when our attempts are rebuffed, rejection strikes deep to the heart.

But, what happens when we are compelled to search beyond our comfortable place of belonging, driven by truth to venture into uncharted territory. What happens when the group to which we are drawn goes against any social sensibility, that it will cause significant disruption in our existing relationships, that it will cause social shunning, mockery, and even rejection? What happens when you are placed in a precarious position of rejecting social acceptance in order to embrace truth? What happens to those social theories of religion then? What happens when you are drawn to 'religion' at great social cost? The literature doesn't provide such a thesis. For, this reality runs antithetical to the academy.

Oftentimes, Atheists find themselves in this precarious position. In rejecting naturalistic materialism and Atheism, they lose professional respect, social relationships, family and friends who have supported them, given them a societal place among the intellectual elite, those who known better than the uneducated, superstitious, the religious. Indeed, most Atheists find that there is no evidence for God, no intellectual substance, no rationality, logic or reason to substantiate supernatural reality, much less a transcendent, personal God. That belief is for the social cliques of the underling. You don't belong there. Surely, you are not considering social and intellectual suicide, are you?

A decision must yet be made. Which holds most value? Social acceptance among colleagues, peers, and those who know and love you most; or, intellectual honesty in the pursuit of truth? Social acceptance and belonging, a tugging of the heart? Or, the sobering truth that logic, reason, and substance is on the side of the religious believer? Against all odds, the Atheist who cannot dismiss truth for the sake of social belonging. For the rational, logical intellect, he cannot deny what he values most. He cannot feign belonging when his head counters his heart. Yes, 'The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.' (Blaise Pascal). But, once truth is recognized and embraced, the reasons of the head holds a heavier weight, even at the expense of the heart.

Against the grain, the converted Atheist makes his way from the group, often forging a new path away from the familiar sense of belonging to a new, yet more profound acceptance and identity, one that is grounded more foundationally, more deeply in the person of Christ, in the body of Christ. The sole soul makes his/her way from the superficial, temporal, social structure of the world, often on their own, to find true belonging. They have finally found their way home.

November 11, 2014
The White Flag. [Charles]

We resist. We run. We fight. We will not be coerced or manipulated into doing or believing what seems to be so counter to our nature, to our desires. Even if it means great loss. Loss of the one we love. Anything is better than loss of autonomy, loss of logic, loss of reason, loss of intellectual integrity, loss of professional and social respect, or so we think. Nothing is worth all of that. When you weigh the cost, there is no option but to continue running away from and resisting the constancy of the Great Interferer, the inescapable One who reminds you of His presence through the beauty and intricate balance of the heavens, through that nagging sensibility that there really is such thing as what ought and ought not be, of the incredible diversity and value of life itself, of that perpetuating drive for purpose and meaning. Everywhere we go, we run into reminders of that which we desperately refuse to acknowledge.

But, running around the wheel, like a hamster spinning and spinning in vain to make progress, we find ourselves where we end up. The rational arguments begin to reveal their fragile underbelly. Somehow they cannot bear the weight of a countering solid substance. Sand begins to shift and precarious foundations crumble as we open the window and peek to see where the weight of the evidence and logical reason lies. Plunging downward, we grab onto the rope, suspended above the canyon below, defiantly declaring that we know best. We are too intelligent to yield to superstition. We raise our fists, losing our grip, struggling to maintain a losing battle. But it is our battle nonetheless. We are the captain of our own ship. There will be no guns put to our heads to believe what our wills and our hearts so resist.

But, repentance is found in the kindness of God. Turning away, we yet look down, we look around and still find the grandeur of a Creator. Looking within, we still find value and dignity in our life. Looking further still, we see something within our heart that beforehand we avoided. A darkness suddenly exposed for what it is. A filth, unclean not only in the recesses and corners but the heart itself, composed of rot. Another sudden realization. The beauty, light, and grandeur of reality bears utter contrast. The holiness of God. The ugliness, the smallness of man. After all, hadn't man elevated himself through reason only to find that he is not the crowned jewel of creation but rather equal with the dirt, with motivations even more base.

The veil is lifted. Blindness is given sight, but it is a difficult and sobering vision. We are not alone. There is One who Sees, who Knows, but One who also loves and forgives. For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. In our filth, in that sobering recognition that brings us to our knees, we find the kindness of a Savior, a hand that reaches out and soothes, that heals, that brings forgiveness and release, that brings restoration and hope. Running. Resistance. Beating against the chest of God. We bump into reality. Unexpected.

We find at the end of the road a mirror that reflects both the wretchedness of our souls and the beauty and the wholeness that awaits us in Christ. We only need to lay our armor down, wave the white flag, and surrender into the loving arms of our Savior. The One who informs all of reality is the One who substantiates and informs our reason, our logic, our science. He is the One who saves our mind, our heart, and our soul and makes all things clear.

November 12, 2014

In the Blink of an Eye. [Susan; Daniel; James]

How does that happen? One moment, a lifetime of living, thinking one way; another moment, completely transformed. The world once turned upside down is turned right side up. Once dark and empty, now filled with unspeakable love and light. An encounter. A realization. A moment when all things become new. What can explain it?

How are eyes opened to see that which had been beforehand obscured from sight? How are minds enlightened to perceive that which prior to was unthinkable? Something, or rather Someone exists beyond the natural world, beyond this earthly tent. Life, a vapor, a mist, is given substance in the person who created it to sustain into eternity. A whole new world of meaning and purpose communicated suddenly as the drop of a pebble. Knowledge all at once. An undeniable Presence. More than just a numinous experience, a Person. The scales are removed. Everything changes. There is no going back.

The skeptic's charge bears no weight against the moment of revelation. Providence supersedes. Eternality is revealed. Refusing reality is futile and unthinkable. Nothing is the same. New life has taken hold. The door once bolted, locked solid and sure has been breached. Warnings to keep out have been replaced by welcome. There was a knock at the door. Unexpected. Shocking, even. Unexplainable. In the blink of an eye.

What must it be like to sit down upon a rock a confirmed Atheist, and to rise a few minutes later swearing to the existence of God? What must it be to lay down for a night's rest a non-believer, only to be awakened in the middle of the night to the reality of Christ? How do you respond when you suddenly find yourself in the presence of a holy God and are sobered to your own sin, but then touched by His loving, forgiving hand? How do you respond?

Was it real? Was this merely a psychological projection of unconscious need? Wishful thinking? You weren't seeking. Curious perhaps. Antagonistic maybe. Resistant most likely. You had no felt need for God. No desire for Him. God was only for the weak and needy, an illusion, a crutch. And you, the most skeptical of them all find yourself in a precarious situation. You find yourself inexplicably on the other side. Something happened. Difficult to describe. Recognition of sin, of need. Warmth. Light. Peace. Could a figment of imagination provoke such a change so sudden and solid?

Radical transformation in a heartbeat. Sure. Life turned from darkness to light, from death to life. Reason, logic, and experience attempts to counter the violation of nature, of all things normal. Supernatural invades the natural. Interrupts the soul. Informs the mind and heart. The weight of the moment, of the encounter profoundly tips the scales to the side of belief. Belief for good reason. Against all odds. Life will never be the same. There is a God after all.

Freewriting November 13, 2014

Fight Club. [Sean. Jeff]

They are looking for a fight. They come out from their corners to fight against a God whom they contend does not exist. Gloves up, dancing around the ring, looking for the upper cut, the cross jab, a hit below the belt. They are keen to find the weakness in the opponent and rush in for the kill. After the final blow, they raise their hands victorious to declare once more that they have won. Standing alone in the ring they declare there is no God, at least until the next fight.

Why so bent on the destruction of that which does not exist? What drives the Atheist to be so methodical in training so as to take down any possibility of the existence of God? Is it the anger and pain of disappointment, of experience? Is it the intellectual arrogance and drive for autonomous existence? The running away? The repression of guilt? Passions run strong for the fighter. The fight is not just hypothetical or removed, it is personal, virulent, a visceral resistance against the light.

Uninformed Christians are easy targets. They don't choose to enter the ring, but often times are dragged in, unprepared, ready to give up in the first round. They have not trained and are swiftly taken down by a quick jab, swift and sure to an unguarded weak spot. The opponent knows how to navigate the ring, has been there many times, and wins in short order. Once again, he claims victory, superiority of intellect, logic and reason, the rational, scientific approach. Faith is relegated back to the corner of ignorance and superstition, bleeding and defeated from the striking blows.

But, occasionally, the fighter finds a worthy opponent, one who has done due diligence, who understands the game, who sees that the trash talk is not backed up by substance. The tables are turned. Weaknesses are identified in the fighter. Strategic strikes are rendered, sobering him to reality. Exposed, the fighter turns in one last jab to take down his adversary, but then turns to see himself for the first time, weak and in need. The heavy weight champion falls to his knees. This is a battle he cannot win. The knockout sobers. Unexpectedly, a hand reaches out in kindness and love. Admission, forgiveness and release come quickly.

Loss brings life, and the fighter arises to contend for the other side, the side of truth and grace. He turns to fight for life that is truly life.

The fight club continues.

Freewriting, December 8, 2014.

The Subway.

I just listened to an amazing testimony of someone who has not yet formally participated in this study, but I hope remains willing. He begins his YouTube testimony in the caverns and recesses of the NY subway. For the naturalist, all is black and white, no color, no meaning, no purpose, no life beyond. Only long passageways and escalators and mass transit that takes you from one part of the cave to another. Those who believe that there is something more, something other than what they see or hear or smell are deluded, irrational, wishful thinkers, not in touch with real reality. We've got to be sober minded and make the most of what is real, what is available, only what is inside of the maze of tunnels. That's it. That's all there is. Deal with it.

David, though, was not only confined to the caverns, he soberly recognized the existential meaninglessness of it all. If nothing held meaning, nothing held value, what did it matter if he took a hammer to his father's head on Thanksgiving Day for no good reason. He couldn't even think of anything that his father had done to deserve such a fate; but, nevertheless, that didn't stop him from following through with such a barbaric and brutal act. David's mental prison, his lack of remorse, his paranoia, his extreme actions seemed relentless. What could a physical prison possess that would allow him to not come to the end of his senses, because he didn't seem to have those. He was emotionally, spiritually dead, completely numb to the consequences of his actions. He was a monster with no remorse.

But, light and hope were there in another prisoner, a Christian who challenged David through thoughtful questioning of his worldview. This was new and mentally sobering, causing him to begin a quest of study of the Bible in order to disprove the Christian superstition. An unlikely friendship developed. Once David was moved to solitary confinement, time and opportunity gave him a chance to dig deep into the Christian worldview in order to tear it apart. What he found, though, continued to peel off the layers, testing his own assumptions about physical reality, about moral reality, about his own immoral actions.

He came to a place of the unavoidability of God and fell down, surrendered to the sobered truth of His Redeemer. Though imprisoned, he had received spiritual pardon and began to see life in glimpses of color and light. He found the world above the underground, the one that was rich and abundant in love and peace, in beauty and grace. He found a life that he never knew existed, life that is truly life in Christ. He set foot on the upward staircase that led him out of the subway dungeon and into the exhilaration of where he was meant to live.

Sobered transparency. Stunning transformation. Incredible graphics in narrative and visuals. His testimony serves to remind us that even the most heinous among us can be restored to wholeness, the most blinded to sight. God is the One, the only One who resurrects and gives life to the dead.

'And such were some of you, but you have been washed, you have been sanctified, you have been justified in the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God.' I Corinthians 6:11.

What's on your storefront? What is the position that you are holding that looks good, that sounds good. This façade, however, doesn't invite people to come in and see what is behind the window. The man behind the curtain is off limits. Just make sure that the window is well-dressed with dynamic slogans, convincing attitudes, dressed to the nines with compelling ideas and sustaining intellect. Knowing that is good enough. Knowing why is off limits. Why? Perhaps you don't know why. There are not good enough intellectual reasons, at least on the surface, to support the display. But more than that, you are not allowed to come in and investigate emotional reasons that lurk beneath the surface. Those are entirely off limits to you, and perhaps even to ourselves as well.

A good front. That's easy. A quick line. A smug look. An easy kill. Goliath stands tall, invulnerable. The armor is imposing. Certainly, no intelligent person would dare to stand, would dare to engage the giant. After all, science has endorsed him. Logic and reason have placed their bets on him. He is undaunted, not worried about any foe, especially those who are weak in mind and body, who is foolish enough to rise up and face the institutionalized, clear, cultural winner. Naturalistic philosophy. Nothing beyond this physical world. No ultimate meaning, purpose, or value. No objective right or wrong. No special human dignity. Sobered reality. The giant stands and dares anyone come and engage. Stalwart. Confident. Mocking. Ridiculing. A storefront of strength and power, of anticipated victory.

But, is his façade vulnerable? Are there weaknesses underneath the armor, in places of exposure. What lies behind the mask? Doubts? Fears? Questioning? What made him resist or run from God? Was it an experience? Was it a desire? Was it an apparent irreconcilability between science and religion? Was it a person? A disappointment? An illness? A loss? Was it a philosophical argument? Was it lack of evidence? Unanswered prayer? A lack of a personal encounter with God? Was it sin and shame and guilt? A desire for autonomy? If we opened the doors to the store, what would we find behind the storefront? What would you find? Are you brave enough to look? Are we brave and loving enough to ask?

Everyone has a cover. What is hidden behind the mask? What is the story we are telling to prevent exposure, to maintain our stubborn individuality, to support our pride, to affirm our personal desires, to soothe our pain? Why do we run from the one and only true and living God who knows us better than we know ourselves, who loves us beyond imagination, who desires for us life abundant. Why do we resist, cover in armor, and present a storefront that feigns beauty and goodness? Because our own thoughts and actions, our godless souls are the opposite, filled with ugliness and evil. We hide in the shadows because we don't want to be found. We don't want to be found by the One who can purge the darkness and fill us with light and life. Stand strong and tall. Resist all incoming. That way we'll win.

But then, David comes, strategically positions his stone in the slingshot and fires. We see behind the window. Exposed vulnerability becomes the place of death. But, then again, death of life had occurred long before the giant fell. Resisting God, putting your best foot vainly forward was not enough in the end. And the Father is grieved at the loss, not only in this life, but in the one that followed.

We think that we can just take God off the table and keep everything else, like putting the salt back in the cabinet but keeping the whole meal. Yes, life may not be quite a savory without a little spiritual seasoning, without the hope for something more; but we can get used to it. In fact, now we can really enjoy the meal and live life! Bon Appetite!

But, that is mistaken. You see, the problem is that you can't just take the puzzle piece of God out of the picture and keep all of the rest that is tied to Him. God is the one that holds up the table, the foundational legs that supports it. In fact, there would be no table without the One who created it. Further, there would be no human beings to enjoy the meal, nor enjoyment to be had. If humans existed, joy is not the product of blind, purposeless processes. Determined action is. Asking another to pass the salt is, along with joy, a mere series of neurons firing and chemicals reacting.

Not only is there true freedom and joy, there is no grounded rational conversation that seeks for and determines truth. Conversation yields determined memes, spreading like bacterial viruses. Not that any of this is wrong, certainly, because objective goodness or evil is a moot concept. All just is. Why even gather for a meal? Why have a purposed event? Purpose, too, is an illusion that humans contrive in order to promote survival. Consciousness is an illusion. Even the self is an illusion. At least according to those who are true to the implications of the naturalistic worldview.

When you take God off of the table of your life, when you choose against Him you are also choosing against yourself and everything you hold valuable in life and living. You are choosing against love and genuine relationships, against reason to trust your own reason, against holding any humans with dignity, against true freedom of will and thought, against hope for the future, against real meaning and purpose in living, against deep and lasting satisfaction by refusing a relationship with your Creator. Who would do that? Why would you do that? In 'killing' God, you are only killing yourself. You are killing truth, beauty and goodness. You are killing life itself.

But, you are ultimately deceived. This world and everything in it declares the handiwork of God. His reality is inescapable. His divine nature and his eternal power. You can hide. He gives you enough shadow to do that. But he also gives you enough light so that you are without excuse. To refuse is foolish vanity.

'A man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word 'darkness' on the walls of his cell.'— *C.S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain*

Radical transformation. Deep humility. Holistic life change. Transformed purpose. Those who have moved from darkness to light experience such a dramatic shift that they want others to know, to feel, to experience the same. No longer with darkened minds, new life provides more than restoration of rationality; rather, God provides a suprarational perspective on life, on living, on what is true, on what is false, on what should be embraced, on what should be left behind.

But, the realization of God's reality, of His truth is not always informed through rational means, but rather non-rationally. In a dream. In a vision. In an undeniable experience. God reveals Himself vividly, powerfully, compassionately. In His holy presence, our unholiness is fully realized, but His grace and mercy simultaneously overwhelm. Filth is removed. Darkness is expelled. Forgiveness is granted. Reconciliation and release. There is no going back. Once profound love is experienced, even in the midst of recognized sin, the only path is towards Jesus. The only expression of truth and love are through Jesus. The only purpose in life is for Jesus. The deepest and truest of all loves are in Jesus.

The scales are lifted. Blindfolds are removed. Sight is restored and illuminated to greater, clearer vision. The world begins to make sense in a way beforehand was hidden from view. Light. Coherence. The facts fit together. Correspondence. The facts match reality. Wretchedness and greatness of humanity. Only through Jesus can the brokenness be restored to wholeness, can suffering bring meaning, maturity and life, can sin be acknowledged and forgiven, can hope be restored. A greater vision. A clearer view of reality. More than the naturalistic, materialistic world. More than an impersonal spiritual oneness. Made in the image of God, through Christ we become more than we could ever hope for or imagine. A new life. A new creation. Fullness and satisfaction.

This cannot be kept quiet. God has done too much. No time or room for hiding. More must know the profound truth of Jesus. The matchless name of Jesus. It is His work in us, moving in us and through us to let others know of His reality. Is reality secular? Or, is reality more than that? More than humanism. More than mere spirituality. More than religion. Reality is a person who created, sustains and informs all of reality. Our lives and loves flourish when they align with what is true and beautiful and good, when they are reconciled to God.

Radically transformed lives become radically useful in the hand of God. Pencils moving across the paper, strokes become letters and words, revealing the Author, the Composer. Gloves filled with the Spirit of God become the hands of Christ, touching, reaching out in love to the untouchables. Renewed minds learn and live, guide and teach the source of all truth, knowledge, understanding and wisdom. There is no going back once you have tasted of the heavenly realms, have fallen before the King of Kings who cleanses you and adopts you as His own. The truth of reality is finally known and embraced. You are His and He is yours. The weight of darkness is expelled. Jesus, others, and all of creation are seen in a whole new light.

Time to go tell it on the mountain.
Freewriting December 16, 2014
Be the One. [Mary]

Be the one about whom it is said, they really believed and lived like it was true. Be the one who speaks Jesus, who lives in humility and grace, in forgiveness, generosity and love. Be the one who knows what is true, who walks in truth without compromise, who doesn't bend to cultural norms, who doesn't disgrace the gospel through vulgarity or immodesty or gossip or immorality. Everyone knows. Everyone sees. Those who don't believe may publicly disrespect, mock or insult, but they really want you to remain faithful to Christ. They know what that means. They know what that looks like. They know when you cheat God that you are cheating yourself and others. They know.

In fact, they are disappointed when you, too, fall into sin because then it means that the Christian life is no different than their own. They lose hope that something better exists, something more, something different that does not disappoint. They want to see authenticity, not in the way of showing our sin to all, but rather an authentically devoted life to Christ. They want to taste and see that God is good, even if it is through someone else, even if they aren't willing to give up their own lifestyle for yours, for Jesus.

Be the one. Be the one who is different, who shows compassion, who listens, who hugs, who speaks wisdom, who values goodness, beauty and truth. Be the one who goes out of their way to value those who don't feel valuable, to love. Be the one who is kind and humble, who is the first to serve and the last to receive. Be the one who knows what is true, who has studied to show himself diligent in the Word, who dwells richly in it so that it pours out from his heart into his words and actions, so that it informs all that He is and does. Be the one who prays for the hurting, the first one to reach out to the needy. Be the heart, the mind, the hands of Christ. He has given them to you through His Spirit. Be Christ. Be willing to allow His life to be yours, to live through yours. Be the one who is surrendered.

Then, you will not only be a sweet aroma to God, but you will also be an attractive aroma for Christ to others. They may not want it at the moment, but they will remember. You will make an impression on their heart, perhaps unsaid, perhaps unfelt, even mocked, but you will cause them to see the reality of God, a palpable, living reality because He is living through you. God's divine nature and eternal power will not only be seen in the heavens, it will be revealed through those stars that shine in the universe. Those who don't complain, regardless of their life experience, cause even the blind to recognize that there is something there, that reality is not merely secular, merely material, generically spiritual.

Be the one who stands firm in the word, who stands up for the reality of Christ, who stands out because he doesn't mind reflecting His Savior, who is noticed for standing tall and true to his beliefs. You never know who is watching, who is waiting to see, who is wanting what you have, who is wanting Who you have in your life.

Be the one.

Freewriting December 16, 2014

Stereos and stereotypes.

Vinyl records are making a comeback. They're now considered cool among those who know what that is. Lines compressed on a black disc, two-sided, two-dimensional. Stunning it is to think that a fully orb'd sound can emerge from such flatness. Yet, when the needle descends, all doubts are put to rest when music begins to occupy every available space and beyond. It is a curious thing. At first glance, the unexposed would scoff and mock, would think it impossible that such rich depth and beauty could come from a plastic pancake. Only through experience could the skeptic be made a believer. It doesn't take long. One exposure is enough for many to become avid collectors and advocates of vinyl.

Misrepresentations. Misconceptions. Stereotypes. Those who bear the name of Jesus are often given a quick glance and dismissed. Impotent in intellect. Inept in life. Unsophisticated. Uneducated. Naïve and ignorant, superstitious and weak. Intolerant and small, morally backwards and hypercritical. Hypocrites. Hate-filled. Dangerous. Non-progressive. Not enlightened. Bigoted. Who would ever want to be one of those? 'If I ever become a Christian, just take my gun and shoot me dead.'

Misrepresentations. Misconceptions. Stereotypes. Those who resist the name of Jesus are often given a quick glance and dismissed. Lost. Evil. Immoral. Dark. Dangerous. Rebellious. Hateful. Who would ever want to be one of those? 'I didn't get close to anyone else, especially if they were religious Christians.' 'Nobody came close to us.'

And never the twain shall meet.

What happens, though, when the record is played, when someone listens for the first time and realizes that his preconceived notions were utterly mistaken? What then? All are made in the image of God, fallen and wretched, beautiful and infinitely valuable. All desire affection and belonging, to love and be loved, to know and be known. All seek after a meaningful and purposeful life. All realize that there is something broken that is in desperate need of remedy. The human condition, the desire to flourish, to find truth and joy, to live in good relationships, to be rid of guilt and shame, is common among all. We are more than lines compressed on a disk, unplayed. More than stereotypes.

When given a chance, each human soul is revealed as possessing an extraordinary song. Only when aligned with the Composer's purposes and enablement can that music be played. Some vinyl records are stored in a dusty bin, hidden in the storage closet corner, waiting to be found. Some desire the hiddenness, the safety of darkness. That is, unless and until they hear from the distance, a song, genuine and lovely. Not a stereotype, but real and pure music that is undeniably different and beautiful, unexpected, smashing false religious icons, smashing facades of emptiness and darkness.

Jesus, then, becomes the sound which invites, which fills not only the room, but the heart and soul as well. He becomes the place where artificial album covers are removed, where we learn to see, to know, and to love others as they are, as loved by Him. Where melodies sing and harmonize.

And there the twain shall meet.

December 21, 2014
The Biggest Question

There is no bigger question for you, for me, for us. No idea has bigger consequences. Some consider it. Some do not. Some ignore. Some deny that the validity of the question itself.

May 4, 2016
Connecting the Dots

When I was a girl, one of my favorite things to do was to draw. Dot-to-dots were fun because there was a mystery to solve in the process of drawing, of discovering what picture would be uncovered as my pencil lead from one numbered clue to the next. Satisfaction settled in as the disjointed points began to form lines that made visual sense, and my internal sleuth arrived at a conclusion before the last number was reached.

We are drawn towards patterns. Our eyes, our minds earnestly seek to make sense of the world around us, to make sense of our circumstances, our relationships, our lives. Gratified relief often follows understanding, and we search after places of knowing – that is, unless our discoveries conflict with our desires. What then? What happens when we connect the dots and they don't lead to contented satisfaction?

Augustine portrays two cities - The City of God and the City of Man. Our desires for the City of Man can blind us or cause us to be 'obstinate' towards the City of God. When the dots don't connect in a way that pleases our lusts of the eye, lusts of the flesh or the pride of life, we try to change the numbers, the direction of the pencil against what is written on the page of reality. We interpret the new drawing in esoteric, erudite language, its form with heightened intellect. 'Surely novelty reflects evolved thinking, enlightened being' remarks 'the bright' among us. But the good, the true, the beautiful remain steadfast, unmoved, an ever-constant reminder, unperturbed by delusional musings.

Perhaps, then, it is better not to connect the dots, to leave them be. Loose. Unconnected. Free. 'They lean on a spider's web, but it gives way; they cling to it but it does not hold.'⁴⁶¹ But that is the preference to unwanted authority. 'They are always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.'⁴⁶² For truth is uncomfortable. It confines, demands from the one who finds it. Why, then search? Who wants demands? Yet, truth sets you free. It gives freely that for which the soul longs, leading to life that is true, to goodness, to beauty, to full acceptance, extravagant love, contented satisfaction.

Why turn away from the source of light, the One who illuminates the patterns, makes sense of man's greatness and wretchedness? Why snuff out the path, the Guide who brings you home into the loving, compassionate arms of your Father? Why kill your own worth, your own dignity, your own meaning and purpose, your only hope? Why vainly pursue futility?

Esther Meeks says that knowing God is like trying to figure out a Magic 3-D picture.⁴⁶³ Yes, there are many dots. They form a pattern, discoverable by the one who decides by cooperative will, who desires to know. Who among us will connect the dots? Who will courageously venture to climb towards the summit of reality instead of the dark caves of blindness and obstinacy? The one who chooses life.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶¹ Job 8:15

⁴⁶² 2 Timothy 3:7

⁴⁶³ Esther Meeks, *Longing to Know*

⁴⁶⁴ 'To whom else shall we go, Lord? Only You have the words of eternal life.' Peter. John 6:68